

## First Sunday of Advent, Cycle B

Isaiah 63:6b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; 1Corinthians 1:3-9; and Mark 13:33-37

My childhood home was built on a hill inside a hollow in the low mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. In the kitchen, we had what we called a picture window that faced west. As we ate our dinner, our eyes were level with the line where the mountain ridge met the sky. We came to be familiar with the way the sunset moved later and later, farther and farther northwest, and then earlier and earlier, farther and farther southwest. In my current home, I do not have that daily, intimate appointment with the sky. I am often caught off guard by the days "suddenly" being so short each fall or so long again each spring.

As we start the new liturgical year, we may expect a sudden change. We may think, "Oh good, we are done with those depressing end-of-the-world readings!" or "Finally, we are out of Ordinary Time and into the fun of Advent and Christmas!" Yet this Sunday's readings could easily have been used for the Feast of Christ the King, with Mark's chapter 13 about the end of the world. We are confronted with the fact that liturgical years, like solar years, are cyclical. God and God's agenda are too complex for us to look at all at once. Our spiritual journey takes us repeatedly over the same lessons and the liturgical cycle passes through gradations on a circular spectrum. We are currently moving from Jesus, the Lord of the Universe, to Jesus, a homeless newborn in an animal's food trough -- in about five weeks! Our readings invite us to be aware of the subtle shifting as it happens.

Awareness is the gospel's call: "Jesus said to his disciples, 'Be watchful! Be alert!'" He was answering the specific question, "When will the end of the world happen?" Yet he declared, "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'" We should not dismiss this teaching as the irrelevant concern of a bygone era. Nor should we live with our bags packed and one foot out the door. In Jesus' mini-parable, the head of the house assigns servants to be "in charge, each with their own work and orders the gatekeeper to be on watch." God tasks us with responsibilities in the present moment. Note that there is only one gatekeeper and many servants. In other words, keep an eye on the future, but really concentrate on our God-given vocations in the present. This work is often mundane but it is the good, solid work of caring for those in need. As Jesus makes clear elsewhere, action in the Kingdom of God is determined solely by compassion. We watch by attending to the small, never-ending opportunities for love and how they change our hearts. The end of the world begins in the service we do now.

Paul also invites the Corinthians to recognize that they must connect their daily behavior to their belief in Jesus. Paul uses this introduction to his letter to summarize his main point in writing: Christ Jesus is the source of their gifts and these gifts will keep them on track (irreproachable) for the Day of Judgement. Recall how the Corinthians were using their gifts to create strata in their community. They were also holding onto moral practices from their pre-Christian lives. Rebirth in Christ Jesus provides the grace to live rightly. He is a role model, teacher and source of goodness. "God is faithful" undergirds the circular track on which we live, so we must pay attention to God's faithfulness.

Another shifting aspect of our spiritual lives is the quality of our connection with God. We have our high points where all is well. We then begin to let things slide -- maybe skipping prayer occasionally, starting to criticize the behaviors of others or unjustifiably indulging our own needs. After a time, we discover that we have disconnected ourselves dramatically from God. Isaiah's communal prayer of repentance captures this progression well: We begin by blaming God for our wandering and hardness of heart. Then we call on God to perform some dramatic saving act, bigger than any before. If God would turn to us, that would shake us up and turn us back to God! At last, we acknowledge, "we have all withered like leaves and our guilt carries us away like the wind," and the prayer sits with this guilt at length. Finally, the "Yet" in the last verse is the sudden realization of the change that has been happening throughout; we have turned again to God and can acknowledge our utter dependence on God. In this first week of Advent, let us attend to this track we are traveling, with all its subtle shifts.

- ❖ Identify a regular kindness you do for someone else. How has it changed you?
- ❖ Where are you in the cycle of your relationship with God?

11/25/2020, Bernadette Rudolph