

Advent I Year B

“And what I say to you I say to all, keep awake.”

We begin today a new church year, the season of Advent, the way we begin every new church year...we begin the church year as our world sinks, quite literally into darkness...we are approaching the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year for us who live in the northern hemisphere...leaves scuttle lifeless along lonely streets driven by indifferent winds of a dying season...it is a time when depression spikes according to studies; it is a time when hope seems more removed...the stories of darkness in the news seem more poignant...at home, violence in our streets more and more common place...violence and political unrest in the Middle East escalating again with global ramifications...the financial markets fragile and unpredictable...I heard a news survey on NPR this past week that concluded that the majority of military men and women, despite their undeniable patriotism and bravery, thought that we never should have fought the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and now they are returning home with very slight possibilities for employment.... And by the way, arctic sea ice was at its all time low this year....I could keep on and get maudlin, but I wont... You can add to the list...Isaiah said it best...darkness covers the land; deep gloom enshrouds the people...He was referring to the captivity of Israel in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E.....but he offers hope that the Lord will rise up and that all people will stream to the saving light of God....and things are no different in Mark's day as he writes about the calamitous darkness descending upon the land, the ruthless destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the ensuing police state and continued Imperial brutality following the legacy of the tyrannical emperor Nero... and then... the sure and certain and audacious hope of God's saving power which will dispel such darkness.

That has forever been the theme of Biblical history throughout the Law and the Prophets, the heart of the Jewish faith and ours, and no different in New Testament literature....that the world has forever been besieged by the dark, and that the saving light of God has forever been imminent, signs of it everywhere breaking into our world...and we modern faithful as well dare to hope, audaciously dare to expect that this light will come into the darkness of our lives, into the darkness of our families, into the darkness of our world...Advent is the season in the church of hope and expectation of this light, pregnancy the metaphor, the promise of new life, renewed potential....Truly throughout our spiritual journeys we are forever in

Advent... forever waiting in hope for this promised coming which will make all things well and whole.... Mark exhorts us in the words of Jesus to keep awake as this new day is fast upon us, the palpable dark notwithstanding.

Katharine and I just saw the movie "The Way" at the Crescent Theater, which by the way has been held over for another week... a must see. The protagonist is a successful ophthalmologist living the hard earned good life whose free spirited son approaching midlife despite his father's protestations, decides to walk the Camino De Santiago, which is a five hundred mile trek through the Pyrenees beginning in France, through the Basque country of Spain ending at Santiago de Compostella in the northwest of Spain, which as tradition has it contains in the cathedral there the relics of St. James, the apostle of Jesus. Next to Rome it is the oldest and most famous and most traveled pilgrimage in Europe, keeping hope alive for over a thousand years. The son dies in a freak accident, caught in bad weather in the mountains, and his father flies to France to claim the body... he decides to bear his son's ashes himself along the 500 mi. pilgrimage way... The doctor is something of a loner, something of a curmudgeon, become calloused by the brute force of life, as sadly happens to many of us... and soon upon beginning his journey he encounters other pilgrims... completely unlike himself... and they form an unlikely fellowship that becomes transformative as these pilgrims share in the ups and downs of the journey, and their own life stories... in finding these unlikely friends, these fellow sojourners... the doctor finds himself.

On this past Thanksgiving, after a lovely meal among friends, some of them whom we didn't know very well, which makes something of an unlikely fellowship... after this bountiful meal Katharine and I decided to ride bicycles late in the afternoon... to burn off a few calories and enjoy the end of a beautiful day... All along the way there were the sights and sounds of people gathered, smells of burning charcoal, of backyard feasts... sounds of laughter and goodwill... the feeling of warmth all around... block after block... white people, black people... everyone waved wishing us a happy day... elders, children... men at the grill in animated conversation... women seeing to the whole of it... we rode through all manner of neighborhood and everywhere were these gathered fellowships... moments in time of gently glowing light up and against the darkening sky westward... we arrived home after the last rose ribbon of sunset had faded... at that moment all manner of thing seemed right... the world was aflame with love.

Mark in the gospel reading for this morning is using apocalyptic language so popular in his day as metaphor for the power of the promised coming light. He's using an image out of the books of Daniel and Ezekiel

and Isaiah of the Son of Man coming in glory among the clouds....stars falling from the heavens, the moon going dark....Now Mark is not speaking of some supernatural event....there is nothing supernatural about the coming of this light....The coming of the light is nature, the way things are....Mark is speaking in a literary genre that serves as a hook, as it were, for the imagination....because it is the imagination that can see deeply into what Mark is saying, because the imagination loves high metaphor...So of course this apocalyptic language is not meant literally....We are not to keep an eye to the sky for some Steven Spielberg type arrival of the savior....we are to pay attention to each other, we are to keep awake to our fellow sojourners which includes unlikely strangers who come our way...we are to pay attention to our everyday lives and experience in which this promised arrival is already taking place....We experienced it and saw it Thanksgiving Day on the streets of Mobile, I'll swear to it....people warmed and fed within the bonds of love, full of the joy of sacred fellowship...

When Jesus tells us to keep awake, he is charging us to be mindful, aware of his presence already coming among us....to keep awake lest we miss it...there is nothing more in this life, and dare I say in the life to come, there is nothing more than what we are already so graciously given....so we must not miss it...this coming of the light is a rediscovery of the way the world really is...the way God envisions the world to be...we just have to recognize it...It is right under our nose...But keeping awake takes work...it is no passive enterprise...and it means being open to possibility...open and vulnerable to the new...open to unlikely encounters along the road. The life of faith is in truth the work of recognition...and recognition and discovery require fellowship, shared learning, shared joy, shared pain, shared nurture... What we saw Thursday on Thanksgiving Day was real...nothing supernatural about it...but as dramatic as any apocalyptic vision a prophet could muster...It was love in the flesh, the light of the world, aglow among so-called dysfunctional humanity...but still, humanity the fellowship chosen by God despite its messiness to bear God's light to the world that no manner of dark can quench.

So brothers and sisters, keep awake....keep awake to the love in our midst....keep awake to each other and to the ones given to us along the way... we will encounter them in unexpected ways...and in unexpected times and unexpected places....but keep awake, lest we miss the beauty of the moment...the beauty of when heaven meets earth...and the light of the world comes yet again in power and great glory which engenders yet again God's reign in earth, the great commonweal of fellowship....keep awake, not with our eyes looking towards heaven as if this coming were far from us

aloof in the stars...some future utopia...but keep awake to the beauty that is the every day, because the everyday is all there is on earth as it is in heaven...Keep awake and there in our midst we will see the Son of Man in great glory, the light of the world living and moving among us here and now...in acts of care...in acts of welcome and gracious hospitality...in acts of generosity and joyful sacrifice...in short in every act of love....keep awake to the unlikely, because God is wont to turn up there...keep awake to the least among us, with whom this light must be shared...keep awake to the spirit of the fellowship to which we are given, as unlikely as it may be...in such fellowship someone may point out something to us unseen... something unexpected.

Mark in his gospel is describing heaven in earth, as mundane as a sprouting fig tree, and as near...we just have to be mindful enough to see it... it is nearer than we know...and we dare not miss it... Wherever there are acts of love, the kingdom enters our world. Keep awake and you will see and you will know the world aflame with the love of God...not just for the hereafter...but for now, burning with unspeakable joy....Keep awake and know that that for which we hope is all true...already coming, now and here.