

“Waiting and Wonder”

Mark 13: 24-37

Advent 1/B, November 30, 2008

Lynne M. Dolan

This is an interesting time of year. The Christmas songs would have us believe this is the most wonderful time of the year and it very well may be. This year there is such a short time between Thanksgiving and the beginning of Advent. We are tempted to take the cues of popular culture and immediately shift gears. After all, some big department stores put up their decorations before Halloween was over. Some folks have hardly put away the good china from Thanksgiving dinner before they begin Christmasizing their house. (I know that is not really a word!) When we unpack the ornaments and cherished decorations we get in touch with our past, that which is lovely and familiar. This is the one I made when I was in third grade. Those are the caroling figures Mom has put on the mantel since I was a kid. There is comfort in our past, in knowing those memories are safely stored in that red and green bin in the basement.

Then we come to the first reading from Mark’s gospel that smashes those warm fuzzy feelings of nostalgia. This is an Advent story, not a Christmas story. Jesus is still teaching his disciples how to be faithful when the world comes crashing in around them. He is laying a firm foundation so that when the emotional tsunami hits they will not be overwhelmed. Mark’s words are humbling. While our family traditions remind us of what we do know, Mark reminds us of what we do not know. We do not know when the master will return, so what are you going to do about that? How will you live your life if you are not ever sure when it is going to change forever? This is not the coming of the Christ child all swaddled in the manger. This is the second coming of Christ, the end time, something that has not yet happened.

It can be a challenge to honor Advent. The Advent journey is similar to the Lenten journey. If we focus on our “to do lists” and the number of shopping days left we miss the point of Advent entirely. I love sharing an Advent calendar with my kids. Behind each day’s door is a new surprise. When we think of Advent the image of pregnancy comes to mind. Something wonderful is being birthed within us. We are being transformed by this journey and we can not rush the outcome. There will be bright days and there will be dark days. There is a beginning and an end and each moment in between is a gift.

The message for the first Sunday in Advent evokes some of the same feelings you go through when you find out you are pregnant. There is elation and then a moment of sheer terror. There is the promise that despite having never done this before, God will be our partner in this creative process. We will find ourselves being introspective now that we are to be responsible for someone else. You do not know when the master will return, but what will he find when he does? The Advent journey is more than adorning our homes with the familiar objects from our past. It is about opening wide a space within oneself for something new to be born. It is an opportunity to remember and recommit.

Advent is filled with promise and hope, but even in this season of light, we are aware of the shadows. This year perhaps more than any in recent memory the shadows seem to threaten to overtake the light. We worry about the economy. We worry that we may lose our job or won't find a new one. We struggle with health issues or marital issues or issues with their children. We worry about the violence that is perpetrated all over the world. In these difficult times we want to cling to what we know, that which is certain, that which we can rely on. However, Mark reminds us about "there are things we simply do not know," and it is important to understand the value in this.

No knowing is frightening and unnerving. Knowledge is power and we like power. If there is a problem, we will find an answer. If there is a treatment, we will discover it. If there is a way to bring peace, we will work for it. Where there is a will there is a way, right? Sometimes the greater wisdom and healing comes in acknowledging what you do not know. We do not know when the master will return so therefore, what difference does this make? How will we behave and what will we do differently?

What would happen if you were told you had only one month to live? For some folks this is more reality than speculation. When you first receive a diagnosis of illness, you may wonder this very thing. There will be things you will know and then there will much you don't know. Would you seek reconciliation in a fractured relationship? Would you spend every moment with those whom you love most dearly? Would you go to that amazingly exotic place you were too busy to see when you were too busy living your life? What would you do? What is it that will bring you hope or security or comfort? When you receive this declaration you discover rather quickly where your hope and comfort lie. It is not in you the size of your portfolio or from the wisdom of the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. We discover that our security rests in that which we can not fully comprehend or define. It comes from knowing that we don't have to have it all figured out. It comes from knowing we are a beloved child of God and no matter what happens it will be okay because God is with us. We find comfort in surrendering to the one who knows what we can not and in allowing the Spirit to guide and support us.

The Advent stories are filled with awe and wonder and plenty of admonition. Mark tells us to stay awake because we do not know when Jesus will return. Live this day with no regrets as if it were your last day on earth. Give generously. Love without limits. Trust in the power of God to transform your pain and shame. This is the promise of the season we so easily lose in the hustle and bustle and shuffle. I wonder if it will be different this year. I wonder if people will not be overwhelmed by the uncertain economic times but empowered by them. Perhaps out of necessity they will experience something different this year. There are many beloved Christmas stories that we share over and over again. Some are secular and some are sacred. One story my children and I love of course, is How the Grinch Stole Christmas. The evil grinch came and stole what he thought was the Who's Christmas. He took their toys and their trees and their feast, but he could not rob them of the true spirit of Christmas. As the story tells us, Christmas doesn't come from store or in a box. The spirit of Christmas is something more sacred than what we can ever purchase.

The true gift we can give to each other is the gift of humility. You can not wrap it or put it under the tree. Humility comes in accepting that there are things we do not know. We do not have all the answers even though it feels like we do. We do not live our lives with a crystal ball. We do not always know what the future has in store for us. There is such power in surrendering to the mystery. Be alert. Be awake so that you may be transformed by the mystery but resist the temptation to feel like you need to fully understand it. This scientific age has stripped us of wonder. We live in a time when answers to any question are available at our fingertips; on line, in the library, 24/7. God calls us to step away from the computer and find your way back to the mystery.

Our world is certain for ruin if we do not accept the gift of humility. We need to seek this humility in ourselves and honor it in our sisters and brothers. This is not a weakness. It is a quiet strength that so many people dismiss. Not having the answer does not make you a failure. If we do not remain alert we may not recognize the answers when God presents them. If we do not stay awake, we might miss the opportunity to connect with the one that will lead us where we need to go.

Keep awake, Mark warns us, for you do not know when the master will return. Do not fear the shadows. Without them we can never fully appreciate the light. Mary Anderson says this about Mark's apocalyptic warning, "End times call for tall towers of hope. They call for a lightning-speed reordering of priorities. End times call for alertness, sharpness. They tingle with expectation. They are times of uncertainty and fear only for those whose faith is thin." The end time may seem far fetched, like it will never come, however when we witness unexpected violence like we have in India this week or we remember the blissful holiday season that was torn apart a few years ago by a deadly tsunami, we realize we are never certain when the end will come. So keep awake. Live your life with sacred purpose and there will be no fear. May it be so! Amen