

Mark 13:24-37

Here we are, it is the first day of Advent! Advent is the beginning of the church year... happy new year! Does today's gospel reading sound like it's about a new beginning? Well, yes and no... it speaks of the end of this age which means a new time in our church and our world. It advises us that we know when the fig tree blossoms there will soon be figs. However it also reminds us that we know not the date nor the time of Christ's return. So we prepare, we prepare with the hope that Christ will come again. And the way we prepare, by celebrating the birth of a child who was born over 2000 years ago, is quite unusual. But preparation is important because somehow, we drift away every year and need to be brought back to center.

Almost a decade ago I read a book by John Grisham. Now you may know John Grisham's books are normally some sort of mystery written from a lawyer's point of view since he was a practicing attorney before becoming a bestselling author. The book I'm speaking of is somewhat unexpected from a writer like John Grisham... it is titled "Skipping Christmas", and a movie "Christmas with the Kranks" was produced using the plot of the book. Let me tell you a little about it in case you haven't read the book or seen the movie.

The Kranks always had a huge Christmas celebration with lots of preparation. This year, just after Thanksgiving their only child moved away from home, and they were suffering from empty nest syndrome. Since they'd spent over \$6,000.00 on Christmas the year before they decided to skip Christmas, actually boycott it with no decorations (even though they weren't leaving until Christmas Eve) and invest the money into a cruise for just the two of them. All the plans were final. The neighbors in the homeowner's association were mortified and did all they could to infuse the holiday spirit into the Kranks to no avail, the Kranks even treated their neighbors any way but kind.

The morning of Christmas Eve they were packing for their trip when they received a phone call from their daughter... she was on her way home, taking a break from her work with the Peace Corps in South America, bringing her fiancé to celebrate Christmas with her family. She was excited to have her Peruvian fiancé experience their Christmas traditions which included a huge party the night before Christmas, which, incidentally, was that evening. So they did what any parent would do... they panicked. They canceled the cruise, phoned all their neighbors, the ones whom they had treated harshly, and asked them for help to prepare for a traditional Christmas at their home. Instead of turning them down, the neighbors excitedly chipped in to help decorate the outside of the house according to the homeowner association's standards, get everything ready for the party, including putting up the Christmas tree and preparing food, and purchasing Christmas presents. And it was all finished before their daughter arrived with her fiancé! I'd say that is 11th hour preparation if ever there was such a thing.

So, yes, we could wait to prepare for the coming of Christ until the 11th hour, but we have no idea when the clock will strike the 12th hour. Even Jesus and the angels in heaven had no idea when the end of the age will come. The Kranks had lost hope that their family would celebrate Christmas together. We sometimes lose hope that Jesus will return. Here we are in the midst of a world that seems to have forgotten God, a time that seems ripe for the second coming of Christ, but we can't predict when it will happen, so to be ready we prepare each Advent with the renewal of hope that comes from remembering how God came to earth the first time as a child, a baby, wrapped in cloth to protect him from the harshness of the world into which he was born.

Jesus came to bring us closer to God. To give us a demonstration of God's love. To teach us how to love one another. He came to give us hope, not like the world gives. The Christmas decorations that we put up each year bring us all kinds of hope. Hope that we will soon be receiving presents. Hope that the person who receives our gift will like it. Hope that gifts given in love will be received in love. This love symbolizes the love we received from God. The hope symbolizes the hope we have in God, the hope in knowing that God did not send us an image or a symbol, but he sent his Son, who is not bound by time. Yet we have a confident expectation that God will indeed act.

Jesus said that heaven and earth will indeed pass away but his words will not pass away. He also said that "this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened." But here we are, over 2,000 years since Jesus walked the earth and he hasn't returned. What did he mean by "this generation"? Jesus based this statement on information from the book of Exodus. The span of time between the Hebrews escaping Egypt and entering into the Promised Land was 38 years. All the people who were born in Egypt had died; a generation had passed. This meant the generation would end in 38 years; therefore, the timespan Jesus was speaking of meant 37 years. You see, 37 years after Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, in the year 70 AD, the temple was destroyed. The disciples were still alive. This makes sense because just prior to today's reading the disciples asked Jesus when the destruction of the temple would take place. And perhaps Jesus meant the destruction of the temple was a scale model of things to come. So our gospel writer Mark advises us to stay awake and be ready.

Literally staying awake, not sleeping may be something that happens to some of us, but it is not intentional. And Mark isn't speaking of intentionally not getting sleep. He is speaking of intentionally being a Christ follower. Of intentionally feeding the poor, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Mark is speaking of giving hope to people who have no hope. He is speaking of being prepared to come face to face with Jesus. So every year we celebrate a reenactment of his birth, a reenactment of God coming to earth to live among us, a reenactment of the hope that was brought into a world who was searching for God to rescue them.

And with this we find that God still enters into our world. We find that Jesus still brings hope to the hopeless. As Jesus enters into our hearts, we know the peace that comes not as the world knows peace, but the peace that comes because we know that no matter what happens in our lives, in our world, we still have Jesus. And in the end Jesus wins.

Mark warns us not to wait until the 11th hour, not to wait until the visitor arrives, not to wait to prepare our hearts, our minds, our lives to receive the coming of Christ into our world. Be it the coming of Jesus by the birth of a baby, the daily coming of Jesus into our hearts, or the second coming of Jesus into the world, we need to perpetually be ready. God has given us the hope of better things to come.

All glory be to God.