

Advent 1, Yr B (2011)
Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

The Rev. Karen C. Barfield
St. Joseph's Episcopal Church

In the name of the one, holy and living God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

In the church calendar today we celebrate a new year - a new beginning
and yet our reading from Mark speaks of the end times.

“In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken....When you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

We humans have been expecting the end times for thousands of generations.

Most recently when the world did not end on May 21st of this year, the date was moved to October 21st, and we're still here waiting!

The end of the world has been predicted so many times it has almost become a joke...
another piece of news to acknowledge in passing and then move on.

But Mark is trying to get our attention.

Stay awake!

Don't be lulled to sleep.
Don't become complacent.
Don't give up.
And, don't panic either.

Stay awake...
be alert!

We do not know when the master of the house will return,
and we have been given work to do.

The master of the house, like the thief in the night, comes when least expected.

I don't know if you've ever been robbed.

We have...
and I certainly never planned for it!
The thieves never called me up beforehand to see what time was most convenient.

Most of the time during the season of Advent I think our focus is on the birth of Jesus,
God-become-human,
God incarnate.

It is an event that happened in the past,
an event we remember...
an event which certainly inaugurated the Kingdom of God,
yet an event which remains outside ourselves and our participation.

However, Mark reminds us that that is only part of the story.

The rest of the story is that Christ will come again,
and it is that coming which we also anticipate
and for which we stay awake and watch.

As I was thinking about Advent, these texts and the 2nd coming of Christ, this question
popped into my head:

What if, on the way home from church today, you received a text message which read:

“Jesus will be by to pick you up at 8:00 p.m. Wednesday evening. Be ready.”

What would you do?

What would you make sure you took care of before then?

What is currently on your “to-do” list that you would immediately scratch off?
Christmas shopping?

I share with you a story related by Tom Long at the Festival of Preaching in 2006:

A minister friend of mine in Atlanta at a downtown church planned one evening to go out to eat with his wife to celebrate their anniversary. His wife met him at the church, and the two of them headed out to the parking lot to take the car to the restaurant. But when they got outside they encountered a crisis.

An elderly woman, a desperate look on her face, was kneeling on the sidewalk beside a man, her husband as it turns out, who was lying on his back in pain clutching his chest.

My friend’s wife ran quickly back into the church to call an ambulance, and my friend leaned over to comfort the man. “We have called for some help and they will be here soon . . . ” he began, but the man interrupted him.

“Charlie, forgive me,” the man said.

“I’m not Charlie,” my friend said. “My name is Sam.”

What Sam did not know until later is that Charlie was the man’s son, and years before the man had, in a rage over something, disowned Charlie, and the two had not spoken in years.

The man looked up at Sam and reached out and touched his hand.

“Charlie, please, forgive me.”

“Just relax,” Sam said. “Somebody will be here soon to get you to the hospital.”

But the man suddenly clutched in terrible pain, and it was now clear that he would not make it to the hospital. With his last gasping energy he pulled on Sam’s arm and begged,

“Charlie, please, forgive me.”

Sam followed his faithful instinct, reached out and put his hand on the man’s forehead as a blessing and said, “I do forgive you. I do forgive you.”

Those were the last words the man ever heard in this life.

Later, when he learned what the circumstances were, Sam wondered if he had done the right thing. “I am not his son. The relationship was still broken. What right did I have to grant forgiveness,” Sam wondered.

Then it came to him that his whole ministry was about this, that the whole Christian faith is about this.

We have been given in Christ a restoration and a reconciliation that is already true, already whole, and we are beckoned from God’s fullness to live into God’s future and toward what has already been given as a gift.

We,
you and I sitting here,
have been given a work to do.

Are we willing to live as if Jesus has already inaugurated the Kingdom?
Are we willing to live as if the future will be different?

that those who live in anxiety and fear will be comforted?
that those who live in depression will find hope?
that those who are hungry will be filled?

that those who are homeless will be housed?
that those who are addicted will find freedom and wholeness?
that those who are unemployed will find work?

Stay awake...
Be alert!

For God is breaking into *our* lives
and into the lives of *others* through us! Amen.