

SPG#188, Advent 1B

November 30, 2008

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, **But 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. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

As Advent begins, and we encounter the familiar and graphic New Testament warnings to be aware and to prepare, it is inevitable that we would compare what we perceive as imminently catastrophic in our time to what seems catastrophic in the New Testament readings. And again we must remind ourselves that the scripture, and particularly the gospels, encourage us to reflect on things that are not necessarily pleasant to think about, such as catastrophe. On the one hand it might seem a downer to come to church to deal with unpleasant topics. On the other hand, when one considers the care and deliberation that went into the recording of the gospels, we might realize that the gospel writers would not ask us to consider such things unless it was for the betterment of our faith. And so we are called upon to trust these writers, to trust those who chose and compiled the stories, teachings, and accounts in scripture.

The gospel today speaks in radical terms of the end of the world. And there is a strong challenge to be ready, to be prepared.

And so we are called upon to consider catastrophe. And in considering catastrophe our 21st century minds might automatically go to the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. We might think of a terrorist attack where hundreds, thousands, or more of our people would be killed. We might think of a massive natural disaster, such as a tsunami, that would wreak unimaginable destruction and death. But the questions that confront us upon reading this gospel reading today are these. After we have been faithful to the reading of the gospel and considered the possibility of catastrophe in our lives, then where is our thinking? Then, where is our faith?

To a certain degree the year 2008 has been about catastrophe and the threat of catastrophe. In the warm months, unprecedented flooding hit Iowa and in other states. Hurricanes continued to hammer the US coastal regions. And if that were not enough, we are in the midst of an economic recession, and the war continues.

And so when we consider such things each day, as we all do via the media, where is our thinking? Where is our faith? Do we need to be comforted? Do we need reassurance? Do we need to be reminded God is with us during our lives and after?

Perhaps we think that all we need is comfort and reassurance. Because who can control a tsunami or a hurricane? Who can stop a flood? Who can reverse a recession? And perhaps we think that our call is just to endure those things against which we are helpless. If that is true, then the catastrophic readings of Advent will only remind us of that which is to be endured. Faith then is just waiting. Faith is endurance. Advent is endurance until we get to the relief of Christmas.

And so, is that Mark's purpose for us today? Is he just trying to remind us of what we have to endure?

We are able to read of those in scripture who considered the possibility of catastrophe.

Our namesake, St. Paul, is one of these. He says in Romans.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the loved of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So Paul makes an extraordinary claim in these words. And for our purposes he seems to have looked beyond catastrophe. And he seems to have done more than endure it. For he speaks of being a conqueror and not just a survivor. And Paul did encounter a number of catastrophes in his life including beatings, jail, and finally death.

But what about us? After we consider the potential catastrophes of our day, where does that leave us? Where does that leave our faith? The answer to that is written in who we are. There will be times when any one of us will need to be comforted and reassured.

There will be times when we will need to simply endure. There will be times when we will need to be brave. But there will be times when we like Paul will rise above adversity in victory.

And so, in this Advent, are you ready to assume the role of victor? Are you ready to be one who rises above adversity? Are you ready to assume the role of someone who needs to be comforted? Are you ready to be the one who comforts? Are you ready to assume the role of one who endures? Are you ready to be brave? Are you ready to assume the role of someone who is strong? Are you ready to assume the role of someone who needs help? Are you ready to be clear headed and wise? Are you ready to be one who in your confusion needs guidance?

If your answer to all of these is yes, then I think you are in pretty good shape for Advent.

And beyond Advent, I think you are in pretty good shape to live these days.

The call to Advent is a call to readiness, a call to heightened awareness, a call to know God anew, a call to know our humanity as never before. And in all of our preparations in Advent, there will be times when we are strong for another. And there will be times when we will need someone else's strength.

And so in this state of heightened awareness and readiness we are prepared and preparing for a new light that comes into our hearts and minds, a new light that comes into our world through angels, and shepherds, and a family of three. Bethlehem. Amen.