

## Advent 1 Year B—Mark 13:24-37

“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”

It seems that there were three apprentice devils that were being trained by Satan. They had finished their course work and it was time for field training. Of course, the field is the earth. Satan said to the first devil, “What do you plan to do for your field work?”

Devil 1 replied, “I’ll tell people there is no God.” “Well,” replied Satan, “that doesn’t work very well because in their heart of hearts, most people know there is a God.” Satan turned to the next apprentice devil and asked, “What are you planning to do?” “I’ll tell people there is no hell.” “Oh,” Satan replied, “That’s an old and much-tried tactic but it is not too effective, because most people have experienced some hell already.” Satan turned to apprentice 3: “What do you plan to do?” “I’ll tell them there is no rush; there is plenty of time.”

“Ah my son,” said Satan, “You will capture millions.”

The early Christian community believed the final judgment was coming any day, and I imagine that some of them suffered from the kind of primitive fear that we have when we are in a situation that looks life-threatening, when we pray spontaneously, when we want to bargain with God. I can easily recall one such incident. I was maybe 18 and I was spending an evening with my boyfriend and his best friend Clark. Two young men and we all drank beer. We didn’t drink much beer and even at that age I don’t think I would have voluntarily gotten into a car with a drunk driver. But what I didn’t know—and what my boyfriend didn’t know—was that Clark was taking some medication which absolutely should not be combined with alcohol. Well, we set off for a party with the friend at the wheel of the car. Everything seemed fine. We got out onto the California freeway—70 miles an hour. Suddenly the driver seemed to go totally beserk like he was dead drunk. Within a few seconds we were driving 70 miles per hour going the wrong direction on the wrong side of the road. I have never forgotten the terror of seeing headlights coming just as fast toward us. It’s at moments like those that you think the final judgment has come. Fortunately, the final judgment didn’t come because if it had, I’m not sure any of us would have fared well. My boyfriend was very good in a crisis and he was able to grab the wheel and get the car off the road, all the time talking soothingly to his friend. We got away without a

scratch. Probably everyone can think of moments like that when they realize how fragile and transitory this life is. I have often wondered how we can instill that sense of urgency to which Advent seems to call us without the fear. “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” It’s true; the time could come tomorrow and I think exercises in which we are invited to live as though we had only a day or two left are worth considering. I think everyone considers that the end could come any time, but most of us dismiss it because it seems so unlikely. Death, though inevitable, is not popular. When I was growing up, I don’t remember anyone except a few religious fanatics talking about the end of the world. But more recently, with nuclear power, global warming, and very odd weather patterns with many natural disasters, even sober scientists argue for the end of the world.

But then, Advent is not just a time of keeping alert about the end of the world and final judgment. It’s a time of keeping alert about the Christ child coming. Long ago, one of my spiritual teachers had all of us who were present recall just for ourselves how we felt when we first really became aware of the power of God in our lives and she said, “All that’s really necessary in spiritual life is to keep that enthusiasm going.” For at least several years, I didn’t understand what she meant. If anything, I felt discouraged. I thought of all the hoopla of the early days. Certainly we all go through periods when we don’t feel the same enthusiasm we felt in the beginning. But now that I’ve been struggling along with many others for many years, it seems clear. Why are we all here? I think we’re all here because as we go along year after year trying to be alert, trying to be watchful, falling down, picking ourselves up, that initial enthusiasm, which may have looked so effervescent, seeps underground and supports us from below, deepening and growing. And what seems to happen with those who have become really ripe is that they become such large vessels of God’s love that it becomes impossible to tell where their vigilance leaves off and God’s grace begins.

We heard in St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you at the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So what are we keeping alert about? He’s already been born in our hearts.

This season of Advent is about expectation, about waiting for Christ. But often it seems like we are waiting only for the Jesus in the manger. And as important as it is for us to see that the birth

of the king of Israel is a humble one, Advent isn't just about waiting for the baby in the manger. It's about expecting Christ right here in the vicissitudes of our own lives, right now. This passage may be about Jesus' second coming, but I think it speaks to us also in the here and now. We are called to be on the lookout for the big return, but we are also to be aware of the many ways Christ appears in the present. Are we alert to see where Christ arrives, breaking through time and space to be present in our lives?

I am fortunate to be the director of Oblates for the Community of St. John Baptist. We have meetings five times a year. One of the things we do during meetings is to recall what we name "God moments" What are ways we have been aware of Christ in our presence since the last meeting? This is what Advent is about—meditating on the birth of the Christ child and also being on the lookout for Christ in daily life. Be aware, keep alert, keep awake.

May that Christ child be reborn in our hearts this Advent season and throughout the new year. A blessed Advent to us all. Amen.