

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
DECEMBER 3, 2023**

SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1-8	A Call Upon God to Come Down Again to Save.
1 Corinthians 1:3-9	We Are Gifted by Christ as We Await His Coming.
Mark 13:33-37	We Need to Be Alert to the Coming of the Lord.

READ THE SCRIPTURES

Read the three Scripture passages given in the Lectionary for this weekend. Begin with the Gospel, since the other readings are always chosen in terms of the Gospel reading. (The second reading does not always have the same theme as the Gospel and the first reading. The first reading will be directly related to the Gospel in its content.) Repeat the Gospel reading. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the faith community and does not necessarily answer any questions that an individual may have. We simply ask, “What message does the Church (or this faith-sharing group or this family) need to hear?” We listen to the word with that question in mind.

Mark:

[The Gospel according to Mark will be featured during the whole year in the Church’s Lectionary: Cycle B of Sunday readings.]

We begin the Church’s calendar year with a reading taken from the latter part of the Gospel, just before the Passion narrative in Mark. The concern is with the end-time. Jesus asks the disciples (us, the Church) to be watchful, that is faithful, since all this will take place when he comes to pass judgment on those who are unaware, asleep, that is, when they least expect it. “Watch in faithfulness!” The Church community wants to be reminded that the Second Coming is proclaimed even in the memorial of the Lord’s first coming. The season of Advent alerts us not only to the fact that Christmas is fast approaching but that the judgment is coming speedily also. The Gospel according to Mark was the first of the four Gospels to be written. It is the shortest, containing only 16 chapters. There is no infancy narrative in this Gospel. Jesus is introduced at the beginning of his public ministry. Mark alone has a title at the beginning: “the Good News (Gospel) of Jesus Christ, Son of God.” Throughout, there is a sense of urgency about the message. We see this in the frequent use of the word immediately. God’s time is now complete; God is among us. We need to change our ways; This is the truth; this is “good news.” In Mark, the focus is on Jesus the Christ and on the disciples. The followers of Jesus do not come off with much honor in this Gospel. They are portrayed as slow-witted, failing to understand the message, always seeking advantages for themselves, denying the need for suffering and dying,

etc. Peter is the disciple among disciples! He is quick and impetuous, and he is always wrong! The message of Mark, of course, is for the Church of his day and for the Church of today. The disciples of Jesus are no different today than were his original group! The Church holds up a mirror to its own face this year during the proclamations from the Gospel according to Mark. It needs to take a lesson from the teachings of Jesus and from the responses of the first disciples.

Isaiah:

The reading comes from a longer passage (Isaiah 63:7 to 64:12), really a psalm where the prophet calls upon God to spare the people who have lost everything. They are in exile in Babylon; the Temple has been destroyed; Jerusalem is in ruins. Only if God sends his love again can this people be ready to receive God in their midst once more. The prophet confesses the sins of the people. They have stayed in their sins a long time. They are like those who are radically unclean among whom they live now. Even their good works are like a soiled garment. They have no stability and no rootedness. No one prays anymore. They reap the rewards of the wickedness they have sowed. But, God is their father, is he not? Did God not mold them like a potter molds a valuable piece of pottery? There is hope for them since it is the God who made them who will now rescue them.

1 Corinthians:

Paul begins by greeting that community that he previously brought to the faith when he was among them. Now, there are problems that call for his authoritative intervention. But first, Paul has to remind them that they have been gifted by Christ. "All speech and all knowledge" refer to values that, as Greeks, they would have been proud to possess. But as Christians, they should rather be proud of faith, hope, and love! They will only be perfected in God's ways when the Lord Jesus has returned. Now is the time to look forward to that return and to be ready, that is, sinless.

Questions for discussion

1. What evidence do you see in the way the Church conducts itself that it truly believes that the second coming of Christ is to be taken seriously? Do you really see a Church that stands in constant expectation of his return? Other than what we proclaim in the liturgy, do you think we are serious about the day of judgment? Why do you think we do no better than the original group of disciples in this matter?

2. Discuss the reactions of the members of your group to the message of watchfulness and the expected return of the Lord. Do any of you take it seriously? Do you have a sense of moral urgency as you engage in daily life? Are you truly aware that one must live as if the Lord were coming today? Have you come to a point in your spiritual development where you look forward with joy to the return of the Lord in glory?

3. Some say that the passage deals more with the present than with the future: that it really is a matter of daily accountability rather than one of final judgment. What does that mean? Do you suppose that there is some truth in that view? If we become accountable to Christ on a

daily basis, what do we have to fear of the final judgment? Can we honestly say that we have become accountable to Christ in our daily living?

Suggestion for Christian Action

As a group, assess the benefits there are in not knowing exactly when the end will come. Decide on some group action this week that will give testimony to your faith that Christ is coming to claim the kingdom for his Father.

Prayer

Read Psalm 80 silently. Then, invite the members of the group to offer a one-line prayer expressing their need for healing, restoration, rejuvenation during this holy season.
End with the Lord's Prayer.

Catholic Doctrine

The "end-times" have fascinated the Christian faithful from the very beginning. Early Christians who came from the Jewish community were all very familiar with "apocalyptic literature." Toward the end of the era before Jesus' birth, when Judaism was under occupation from Greek and Roman forces, with their "ungodliness," their cruelty, and religious hostility, the Jewish people had developed a form of inspirational writing that gave them assurance of God's final triumph. "In the end, God will overcome all our enemies and we will be vindicated." Jesus also had used some of this literary form in his utterances concerning the judgment to come upon the world.

The Book of Daniel contains some of this same kind of prophetic literature: apocalyptic. The Christian community, in its early experience of persecution and suffering at the hands of the Roman Empire, continued this form of literature. There are 'apocalyptic passages' in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus talks about the end of the world with its cataclysmic events, the return of Christ, and the eventual triumph of God. The point of an apocalypse is that God is in charge of history, and God will not be defeated!

Of course, the Book of Revelation is the final text in the Christian testament. The whole book is an apocalypse. It says once and for all that God will not allow evil to overcome good.

The Church has developed a multiplicity of traditions concerning "the end." Some of the Catholic tradition holds that Christ will return in a physical form to judge the world. The material world will be destroyed and replaced with a totally different world. Another tradition, equally valid among Catholics, is that the whole universe will be transformed into a kind of world where all creation gives glory to God through Jesus Christ, without having the known world destroyed. In this tradition, the destruction of which the Scriptures speak applies to sin and ungodliness, not to physical creation itself.

Christian fundamentalists would say that the Book of Revelation is literally true, that the

apocalyptic passages in Mark's Gospel are also literally true — that the “stars will literally fall out of the sky.” The sun will be dimmed; the moon will be no more. There are Catholics who approach the Bible in the same way.

See: The Catechism: #668-682.

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