Advent 1

November 29, 2020

Mark 13:24-37

Every now and then, someone tells me that they don’t have the patience to knit. I often tell them that I don’t knit because I’m patient. I’m patient because I knit. It has taught me to be careful, to pay attention to what I’m doing.

And it gives me something to do while I’m waiting.

I have been known to pull out my knitting in long grocery store lines, while waiting for a train to pass, and even once when there was an accident on the road ahead of me.

I’m only able to be patient because I have something to do while I wait.

As we begin our Advent journey, we hear a lot about waiting for God. From Isaiah, we hear the longing of the Israelites, hoping that God would “tear open the heavens” and be with them. The Psalmist echoes that longing — “Stir up your might and come to save us!”

Our reading from Mark offers us guidance on what to do while we wait for God, while we await the return of Jesus.

Keep awake.

It’s easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that Jesus’ return is a distant, far off event. But our Gospel text for today insists otherwise. We don’t know when it will happen, so we should always be ready for it. It might not happen tomorrow or next week or next year.

But it might.

And we have no way of knowing.

So rather than allow complacency to set in, rather than tell ourselves we have plenty of time to get our act together, and rather than spending our time trying to interpret events and figure out if they are signs of Christ’s return, we should be living our lives in a constant state of preparation, never allowing complacency to take over.

We have something to do while we wait.

With his command to keep awake, Jesus isn’t telling us to never sleep. Sleep is an essential part of human life.

What we call falling asleep is the first stage of sleep, and it’s not as much a fall as a slipping away.

We drift into that first stage of sleep unaware that we’re doing so, but if someone wakes us during that time, we might not realize we were asleep.

That’s what happens with complacency. We drift into it, unaware that we’re doing so.

When we practice the kind of waiting Jesus speaks of, a holy waiting, we wait for Jesus’ return with anticipation and hope. We wait actively, not passively. And we wait trusting that we have done our part, and that what we’re waiting for is something beyond our control.

I only knit in a grocery store checkout line once I’ve purchased my groceries and entered the line, trusting that the store has made preparations so I will be able to buy my groceries.

We wait for Christ’s return, trusting that God is making the preparations for what is to come. The timing of it all is not our concern. It’s how we live until then that is our concern.

With his parable about servants waiting for their master to return, Jesus offers us some help in understanding how we should wait for his own return.

The servants didn’t know when their master would return. So as to not risk the displeasure of their master, they would keep up with their work, keep watching for the master of the house to return, whatever the time of day, no matter how long he was gone.

As they waited, they did the work they were meant to be doing. They didn’t let their work slide.

They did this because they had no way of knowing when the master of the house would return. If he returned to find them neglecting their work, they would have deserved his anger, his disappointment. They would have been deserving of punishment for not doing what they knew they were supposed to be doing.

The waiting they did was active, done out of duty to their master.

The waiting we do is a holy waiting, done because we trust in the promises of God, done because of our faith. We wait because we have placed our hope in the promises that God has made. But we work while we wait, believing we have been called to be a part of the work God is doing in the world, and hoping to experience today a glimpse of the world as it will be one day.

Holy waiting is spent using the gifts God has given us for the common good, because holy waiting is not passive, but active.

Holy waiting means looking for signs of God’s presence in the world, signs of what God is up to in the world, glimpses of what the world will be like when God’s plans for creation are fulfilled.

Holy waiting keeps us from complacency and from being caught unaware, caught unprepared, when Christ comes again.

And holy waiting trusts that God will fulfill God’s promises to us.

When I wait in a grocery store line or a doctor’s office, knitting away, I’m patient because I trust that others are doing the work they are called to do. I have done what I needed to do to get to that point and it’s their turn to work so that I don’t have to wait anymore.

The waiting we do as people of faith is rooted in our trust that God will take care of all the preparations that need to be made before Christ comes again.

We learn to wait during Advent so we can understand that God is with us in the dark times of our lives, as the Israelites learned thousands of years ago. We learn to wait so that we are reminded that it is God who is in control, not us. We learn to wait so that we can grow in our ability to trust in God’s promises.

And we learn to wait with patient expectation, tending to the work we have been called to do in the meantime.

But this waiting is not something we do for four weeks a year. It’s meant to be how we live our lives at all times.

Let us pray: Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that binds us, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always. Amen.