

Reverend Julie U. Riley

Mark 13:24-37

November 30, 2008

On this first Sunday in Advent, this first Sunday of the Christian year, it seems a bit odd that we begin our lection in Mark, a gospel that does not even have a birth narrative. In fact, our story today does not begin with a babe in Bethlehem, but with an adult Jesus, in Jerusalem, in the days just preceding his death. It is as though “those who assigned the lectionary text for Advent seem to have been following the advice of epic movie director Cecil B. De Mille: ‘Start with an earthquake, then build to a climax.’” (Feasting on the Word, Martin B. Copenhaver, p. 21)

Lauren Winner was raised Jewish by her former Southern Baptist mother. In college she converted to Orthodox Judaism, and in grad school she became a Christian. In her book, Girl Meets God, she chronicles her first year as a Christian. This is what she has to say about Advent:

(Advent and) Christmastime may be the hardest season for churches. We are inured not only to the Christmas story itself, but also to our pastors’ annual rant against consumerism. Every creative attempt to make the season meaningful, to steal it back inside the church, away from the shopping malls and cheesy radio stations, has been tried, and most of those creative attempts have proved wanting. Perhaps the problem is that we don’t know what the meaning of this holiday, of Jesus’ pushing into the world, is. If we did, we would not have to worry about consumerism; if we knew what the Incarnation meant, we’d be so preoccupied with awe that we wouldn’t notice all the shopping.

(Girl Meets God, Lauren Winner, p. 35)

Is it true? Is it possible that we have heard this incredible news so often that we fail to be awed by it? And what about the promised coming, are we still waiting, expectantly, hopefully? Or have we somehow gotten so caught up in the day to day survival that we have forgotten God’s promise of a time when Christ will come again in final victory? Have we forgotten that we have only seen the first act of God’s mighty deeds, that the kingdom that we see glimpses of now is only a foretaste and will be one day be complete? Have we forgotten that on that promised day, pain and suffering will be no more, and justice and righteous come forth like a mighty rushing stream, and walls that divide will come crumbling down and all of God’s children sit together at our Lord’s table, in the presence of our Lord, lifting up our praises with one heart and with one voice?

The coming of Christ is what we are waiting for, what we prepare for, what we hope for. We may not know the when, and we may not know the how, but we do know the what, we know that the one who has come is the one who will come again, and we wait with hope precisely because we do know the ending: the one who came is the same one who is coming.

This is why we practice waiting in the season of Advent. This is why we do not race to the manger as we race to the mall during this season of Advent. All of our waiting in worship and in our spiritual life is intended to prepare for, to actually make room for, the coming of Christ once again. We wait, not that we may have less Christmas in Advent but that we may have more Christmas, more Emmanuel, more God with us as we wait and prepare for the coming of Christ.

Our preparation for the coming of Christ is given shape and meaning by our hope in Christ’s coming in victory. In Christ we have seen glimpses of God’s kingdom, and so thus this is what we work toward. We may not know what will precisely happen in the second coming, but we do know that Christ’s kingdom will be a kingdom of

justice, so we work for justice, we work for a world where everyone is treated like a child of God, where we see Christ in our neighbor. Thus we are conscientious shoppers, not always simply looking for the best deal for our pocket books, but for the best deal for those who labor to make our goods. We buy product from companies who practice fair labor, we buy products designed to promote self-sustaining lifestyles for those who have no natural means of income. Thus our children buy birds and goats and chickens with their Vacation Bible School offering. While we wait, we allow our privilege to work for the good of our neighbors.

We also know that Christ will establish a holy city where everyone will find home, and thus we seek to be a place of welcome for all of God's children. So we go to Matamoros and we invite Matamoros to come to us; we open our hearts and our homes to persons displaced by all kinds of disasters, and in doing so we begin to see Christ's face in faces that don't always look like ours and in doing so, we begin to find a new welcome for our neighbors right here in Irving. We begin to discover that they are not so very different; that they are actually we. While we wait, we open our arm in welcome.

And we know that God's kingdom will be one where people will not hunger or thirst, neither shall they want no more, so we serve lunch at the Stew Pot, and gather food for Irving Cares, and deliver food through Meals on Wheels. So we gather up clothes and school uniforms, and personal supplies. We put our pennies in the lunch bucket, and we adopt families and children, perhaps even at the risk of occasionally being swindled in order that maybe one will know that this life of poverty is not all there is, that this life of need is not what God desires for them. While we wait, we care for the least of these.

We know that in the end every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, and so we worship, and so we come to the table as a world broken and scattered, trusting that in the end God will gather us into one bread and one body. While we live in a world of not yet, we worship the one who has come and we practice our hope that one day the glimpses that we see now will be fully known to all. While we wait, we worship.

We know we see Christ kingdom only dimly now, but we seek to live into the vision Christ has given us. We know that our work is merely a drop in the bucket compared to the great needs of our world, but we trust that Christ will multiply our gifts like the loaves and fishes, and that in the end Christ will bring our feeble work to fruition. We know what to do while we wait, because in Christ we already seen a glimpse of God's kingdom, and though only Christ will bring the kingdom to fruition, in our Advent waiting we can see glimpses of that kingdom that is already and not yet.

In his book, *Tracks in the Straw*, Ted Loder tells a story of a particularly difficult Advent season in his life. He was walking to a meeting he was not looking forward to, and on his way he passed by a manger scene in the front window of a house. He immediately noticed that the display was larger than the average home nativity display and that, in fact, it appeared that the window itself had been enlarged to accommodate the display. After his meeting he was even more distressed, and as he passed back by this house, he stopped to take a closer look at the display, perhaps he was looking for a little bit of hope. I'll let him tell you in his own words what he saw:

There it all was: the coterie of shepherds, the three wise men, a full complement of angels, and number of assorted animals. They were all gathered around Joseph and Mary, who were side by side, looking... actually just about where I was standing. That was strange.

I stepped closer and examined the scene more carefully. My first impression had been right: There was no manger, no infant Jesus in the window! In effect, the street was the manger, and I was standing in it. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I glimpsed someone smiling and nodding in the shadows behind the

shepherds, but when I looked again, no one was there. Has that ... family intended that the street be the manger?

Intended or not, that scene was strange... That night, that old story was being told differently. This time those silent lighted figures were looking expectantly out on the street for the Christ child, out on the street where the beasts are motorized now, and the milk comes in cartons, and the lambs wool in worsted suits, and people like shepherds sleep on steam grates, and people like wise men dish out food in soup kitchen – or work in political movements or business coalitions or churches to change things so that someday there might not be homeless people or hungry children or addicted parents.

I stood there with tears in my eyes. With a force that lumped in my throat, I realized that just where I was standing, the Christmas miracle happens. In the street, where human traffic goes endlessly by, where men and women and children live and limp and play and cry and laugh and love and fight and worry and curse and praise and pray and die, just there Christmas keeps coming silently, insistently, mysteriously. (Tracks in the Straw, Ted Loder, p. 14-15)

I can't help but wonder if those silent lighted figures were, themselves looking to us for hope. As we remember the Christmas story we remember God's promise fulfilled. But as we live the Christmas story, as we ourselves are the living reminders of Emmanuel, God with Us, we are the sign of hope to those who wait in darkness.

Keep awake! For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, Christ is coming! During this time of Advent waiting, I invite you to live as a sign of hope, pointing to the promise that what God has started, God will complete.