

Now Is the Time

Mark 13:24-37

Advent is the season of preparation for Christmas. We think of Christmas as the coming of the Christ child in the manger, but that is not the view of Mark's Gospel or of the other gospels as well. This season of preparation is for the coming of the New Age of God symbolized by the child in the manger. In the gospels, this New Age came, broke in, with Jesus' crucifixion and was revealed to his followers in his resurrection.

The language the Bible uses again and again talk about the in-breaking of God's New Age was apocalyptic, highly symbolic, language about the near present. It was not, as some insist, about a distant future, not a prediction from the first to the twenty-first century, but insights into the first century that are valid in describing today and tomorrow.

This apocalyptic teaching by Jesus clearly reflected the voice of the early Church. We hear an image and a story. The image is the blossoming of a fig tree, the first definite sign of the season. It represents the *New Age* of Jesus' teaching with which he identified himself and his ministry, with which the early church identified his death and resurrection. This *New Age* was breaking in to the now, always, 2000 years ago, now, and 2000 years in our future--always breaking in.

The story is this: The coming Age of God is like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task and commanding the gatekeeper to stand watch. So, stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning, whether evening, midnight, cockcrow, or morning. You don't want him showing up unannounced with you asleep on the job. Stay at your post. Keep watch. (Mark 13:24-37 *the Message*)

Hear the urgent instructions: Don't fall asleep, stay awake! We are reminded how, in Mark's gospel, the disciples could not stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane, could not stay awake to be with Jesus.

The watchword for Advent is "wake up." Be ready as the Age of God moves into human history. Today the watchword is "hope. We live, just like the first-century followers of Jesus, on "an eschatological existence on the edge of history." In many ways, the season of Advent is a symbol of our whole lives. The world is changing in us, and through us. Advent reminds us that all of life is a time of preparation, looking forward, a time of realization, acceptance, and worship. We are getting ready, not just for the birth of child, but for recognizing and embracing God's very presence in us, in others, and in our world today.

Jesus had a clear vision of how life really worked. The Bible called this reality the *Kingdom of God*, but it is not really a kingdom or a place at all. It is a reality marked by values that are very different from those of the cultures in which we live. He emphasized compassion over efficiency, justice over expediency, peace over domination, and love over all. As we enter into the message Jesus left us with his life and his teaching, we can see the deeper and alternative reality that Jesus was seeing. He still challenges us to embrace that reality and construct our lives based on it. The implications are significant!

Jesus challenged those in power in his day about their legitimacy and their values. Many oppressive leaders are being challenged today in our world—Egypt, Syria, Italy, even American and many others. Faith calls us to challenge the values often assumed by the powerful and privileged of our own time. Theologian Walter Wink wrote:

Jesus does not condemn ambition or aspiration; he merely changes the values to which they are attached. The Gospel of Jesus champions economic equality. The earth, he insists, is so constituted that it will provide all our needs if, and only if, we share

equitably: 'Seek first the reign of God and God's justice, and all these things (necessities of life) will be given to you as well.'" (*Engaging the Powers*, 111-114).

Jesus went out of his way to include the outcasts and to lift up those who were down and out. He challenged policies that perpetuated oppression of the poor. All of this reflects what the Gospels call *The Kingdom of God*, what we might call *The Age of God* or *The Life of God*. This follows the prophetic tradition of Israel that God values our sharing wealth and resources. God values our having compassion for those in pain, our exercising leadership by serving others, and our working for equal access to the opportunities of society for all people.

If we accept this vision of *The Age of God*, then there are clear implications for how we live our lives. One implication is that we use the fruit of our achievements to benefit not only ourselves and those we love, but the general good of our society. Another is that we recognize the shared nature of our spiritual journey, of what we often call our salvation—that much of our relationship with God is our relationship with others. A third implication is that the challenge of God's Age is to see the world in that radical way Jesus did and adjust our lives accordingly. The Bible promises that we can do it because God's presence will always surround and fill us. God is always faithful.

On April 4, 1967, at the height of US involvement in the Vietnam War, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a speech entitled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." The thrust of the speech was the compelling need for America to stop the atrocities in Vietnam, and end that war. He said:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity.

Scripture lessons at the beginning of Advent are often apocalyptic, about the end of time and the coming of God in judgment. But what they're really about is time. What Martin Luther King, Jr. called the "fierce urgency of now!" Now is the time. The question for each of us today is, "What is it time for in your life? For all of us today, "What is it time for in this congregation?"

Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." That puts the responsibility squarely on us to make life the way we want it to be. People of faith pray for change, but then we wait and look around as though we expect that change just to happen. Something challenging comes into our lives and we pray that God will take it away or make it better. Occasionally, miraculously, that happens. Most of the time, however, the answer from God to our prayers seems to be something like, "Learn to grow through this" or "You make it better yourself."

If there is one thing people generally do not like, it's change. We tend to enjoy what is familiar even when it is destructive. We want change when we find ourselves afraid or in pain, but in the routine of our lives, we like to follow familiar ways. The truth, however, is that life is all about change. Life is changing all the time. We just don't notice the changes until they hit a tipping point. Then, the gradually and progressive changing becomes a crisis that requires an emergency response. The gradual build-up of plaque in one's arteries becomes the emergency of a heart attack. The gradual withdrawing in a relationship becomes the tragedy of separation or divorce. The gradual unwillingness to own and ask our deepest questions suddenly becomes a crisis of faith.

Life is filled with change. The question is how we will embrace that change and live into it. The hope we have is to "be the change we want to see." This is perhaps the key message of Christmas—that God was present in Jesus showing us the kind of person we each can become. Our prayers this time of year for the world to become a place of peace, justice, compassion and

love are a challenge to each of us to become that change we long to see. I can almost hear God's answer to our prayers: "Yes, now is the time for you to make peace and justice and to live with compassion and love in your life. Embrace the divine presence within you and your community, and find power in the divine around you. Become the change you want to see in this world. Now is the time.

For you and me personally, this is the only Christmas season we have. Past is memory, future is imagination. Now is the Christmas present. What is the gift you want to give above all others this year? What is the gift you want to receive above all others this year? One of the very best gifts we can give ourselves this Christmas is to respond to God who never stops moving toward us in love. But how can we do that? How can we receive and respond to God's wonderful gift of love?

We respond to God by responding to the world as it is and people as they are. Of course, this assumes that we are able to perceive the world as it is and people as they are. Unfortunately, we often transgress the healthy space that naturally exists between us and others, filling that space with projected opinions, inherited categories, worries, and judgments about the world and about people. But as we let go the need to categorize and control, we can begin to perceive the world as it is and people as they are. And in the process, we respond to God's presence. We respond to God with great honesty and intimacy

We also respond to God by responding to ourselves as we are. Of course, discovering who we are in a genuine way requires an inward journey of letting go and being open, a discipline of reflection and introspection, and some time and effort spent being rather than doing. Such a journey requires questioning many of the rigid categories and negative judgments we have of ourselves. And it requires a community, fellow pilgrims to share the journey.

Finally, we can respond with action to those tiny nudges of God, those very subtle and quiet nudges that are easily missed amid our anxieties, busyness, and task orientation. The "still, small voice" of God's Spirit invites us to place ourselves as we are not our best selves, but our whole selves at the service of the world, of other people as they are, not necessarily as we wish they were! In this way, as we empty ourselves, we become filled with purpose, meaning, and God's Spirit.

In summary, one of the very best gifts you can give yourself this Christmas and throughout the New Year, is to listen, see, hear, and love other people as they are without needing to fix them and without needing to agree with them—or even fully understand them. Ask questions without needing to control the answers. Allow yourself to be filled up like a reservoir that gives of its abundant overflowing. And give thanks for the hope, the peace, the love, and the joy of God—and the expression of God seen in Jesus. Fr. Richard Rohr reminds us:

Every day we must make a deep choice for gratitude, abundance ("there is enough"), and appreciation which always de-centers the self and its cravings. It is the core meaning of worship. Your life is pure gift, and it must be based in an attitude of gratitude. (adapted from *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, pp. 215-216 *Everything Belongs*)

Let this be the gift we give others and ourselves this Christmas. Let us begin now. It is time.