

The First Sunday in Advent  
Year B 12/3/2017  
Mark 13:24-37  
*“What CAN you really believe in?”*

A preacher tells this story about himself.

One summer he took a month off for a much needed time of renewal. During my time off he decided to do a little research. “I wanted to get the perspective of folks who don’t go to church” was how he explained it.

Preachers are insulated in a church bubble. Everything they do revolves around church culture for the most part and that is not all bad.

But here is the thing — if the church’s main task is to reach those outside of it then he thought it would be wise to get the pulse of those outside the church bubble.

How can we be effective at reaching others with the gospel if we don’t seek to understand what they do, where they live, how they hurt, and what their hang-ups are about religion was his thought.

He continued: “One of the things I decided to do during my time away was not to tell the people I met that I was a preacher. There are all kinds of baggage and transference surfaces when you do that. I wanted an honest perspective.”

For example, one Sunday morning he didn’t go to worship. Instead, he went to that great American institution, the “Waffle House!” He got to know the waitress and found out she had two kids and was working two jobs to make ends meet.

She told him how long she had been working there and explained what “scattered, smothered, and covered” meant. Then she told that around 11 a.m. on Sundays they start to get real busy because that is when the church crowd comes in.

He thought, “Here is my chance!” and asked, “What are the church people like?”

She replied, “Most of them are terrible tippers.”

He didn’t know if she ever went to a church, but her impression of a church crowd is that they are not very generous.

He filed that away — “Impression of church folk: lack generosity.”

Another time he sat at a bar and grill out of town for lunch and struck up a conversation with the bartender. He sat there with a Coke and asked a few benign questions. “I found out,” [he said] “that she grew up in bars her whole life.”

Her parents had owned a bar. When she wasn’t working at a bar she went out to bars and hung out with the people there.

He asked out of curiosity about her unique perspective being around bars all of her life by saying “What’s the most important thing you have learned?”

Her reply was quick, “Never trust anybody who says, ‘You can trust me.’ ”

Then she said, “And I have learned that the only person you can count on is yourself.” He filed that one away — “Trust is a very important issue.”

Perhaps the most striking conversation he had was on a golf course [no doubt] when he was out of town. He was paired up with a couple of people. He made sure they didn’t find out he was a preacher.

When most golfers find out they are with a preacher they stop being fun! They also expect you to give them three foot putts!

A guy in the group was in sales. He had taken a big hit in the recession and was trying to get his feet back on the ground.

He had just gone through a bitter divorce and was going through other personal struggles. The golfer said, “The older I get the less I find things to believe in.” Then he railed against politics, religion, and anything else he could think of. At the end of the round he asked, “What can you really believe in?” [CSS Publishing Co., Inc., Mission Possible!: Cycle B sermons for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, by Charley Reeb]

“What CAN you really believe in?” It makes the “church bubble” seem more attractive!

We begin another church year being reminded not of the beginning of all things but with the end of all things as we can imagine them.

Most of us – and if you saw my photo on Facebook this week you would include me too – are deep into the season of NOT Advent but of Christmas.

Of course it is understandable why we do this every year – over look the season of Advent and jump toward the birth of Jesus celebration.

First the stories and memories of the birth of Jesus are warm to the heart.

Look at today’s readings. These readings appear to be about “a far in the future time” rather than the birth or coming of Jesus which everyone seems to be ready to celebrate again!

Let's be honest – celebrating the first Advent is just more attractive than a future advent or coming of Jesus!

Yet all these readings do bear the theme of the coming again of Jesus and the waiting and watchfulness that this reading calls for.

Each year we begin the next church year by looking toward Jesus coming back to earth to establish his kingdom and reign among us as ruler of the universe.

***But however should we react to that as a reality of life?***

There was a story told in a preaching magazine [Homiletics Magazine].

During the course of a normal day in a diocesan office, a secretary suddenly burst into a bishop's office.

With frantic note in his voice, the secretary announced there was a very dirty and unkempt homeless man in the outer office.

“He says he's Jesus Christ,” the secretary declared. “What ever are we going to do?”

Without a second's pause the bishop replied, ***“I don't know about you. But I'm going to look busy.”***

[pause]

Perhaps as we traverse this season of Advent, this time of hope for the future ***we also need to look busy!*** Maybe even beyond looking busy ***we need to be busy for God's kingdom.***

“But busy doing what?” is a question we must ask. The problem with busy work is that it often does not accomplish much.

We could begin by acting as if we believe the coming will happen!

We could begin by being generous so that Christians begin to be recognized for their generosity rather than lack of generosity.

We could begin by being trustworthy so that Christians begin to be known for the trustworthiness rather than our lack of trustworthiness.

All of these are acts of our own faith and our will. It doesn't take a “magic makeover” to do these things; it takes a change of attitude and desire on our part.

I know that most of us are concerned about the future.

We are concerned about things like: “Is our job secure? Will we be able to afford our children's education? Can we offer our children the very best of everything?” “How will a tax cut affect us?”

But what this first Sunday of Advent really tells us is that just as the birth of the messiah Jesus was foretold and happened, the birth of the future is in God's hands.

The future is not really -- for all our concern and worry -- even in our hands!

The future is in God's hands, in the hands of the one who loves us most fully and who waits to welcome most lovingly. And even if we do not think so now, this word of Advent is a word of hope!

It is like the prayer uttered by a young child once at a Thanksgiving Day dinner: "Dear God, this is Jimmy. Thank you for Thanksgiving and Christmas and all of the holidays. Thank you for the turkey and dressing and Mom and Dad and even for my little sister, even though some times she can be a pain. Thank you for books and TV and game boy. Thank you for loving us. Oh, yeah. **And take care of yourself God, because without you, we're sunk.** Amen."