

First Sunday of Advent:

ADVENT and CHRISTMAS Calendar:

Mark 13:24-37: Preparation for Christmas

Advent is a time of personal preparation for Christmas. And we have to be prepared if we want to see God's work. We have to stay awake and be alert so that Christmas can be meaningful. We have to prepare our hearts as well as our homes.

A woman and her daughter were out Christmas shopping on the day after Thanksgiving. Just as everyone had predicted, the crowds were awful. They had to skip lunch because they were on a tight schedule. Toward the end of the day, Mom was hungry, tired and her feet were killing her. She was getting more and more irritable. As they left the last store, she turned to her daughter and asked, "Did you see the nasty look that salesman gave me?" Her daughter answered, "He didn't give it to you, Mom. You had it when you went in."

This Sunday marks a new "season" in the church calendar. Advent. After a series of twenty-four Sundays defined simply as "After Pentecost," the church community around the world is now called to focus on a new turn in our journey.

Advent is a season of anticipation and preparation for the "coming" (adventus) of Jesus. But mostly during Advent we do strange and ridiculous things. We put up a tree in our living room. Not too long ago our ancestors even used to light the tree with burning candles, which burned many houses down. We decorate the whole house as though it was one huge present. We blow our electric bill through the roof with outdoor lighting. We start buying stuff and wrapping stuff and baking stuff and preparing stuff. All to what end? So that when Jesus finally arrives our Christmas celebration will be special and memorable.

Advent is the church's annual adventure in being astounded by something new, not in Macy's but in a manger. And yet the first gospel reading for the Season of Advent is not "something new." Instead, it recalls a prediction from the old as recorded by the prophet Daniel. Daniel 7:13 evokes the vision of a "son of man coming with the clouds of heaven." It describes this heavenly figure as one who will "gather his elect," a message that suggests that those not "elected" are in fact "rejected." It is a grand vision of a heavenly empowered divine "son of man" coming to earth to extend judgment. This "son of man" is a historic figure of heavenly origin, a divine being who becomes human and will change the course of human history.

The final word in this week's gospel text from Mark is to "keep watch," to "watch out" for the signs that will reveal that the approach of this "son of man" is imminent. As we watch, we wait with hope! Advent is a time of Hope. It is always said that while there is life there is hope. This has even a deeper meaning in reverse: while there is hope there is life. Hope is strength. Hope sheds light into despairing hearts. It inspires the will to live. Hope is the doctor's most powerful ally. It is a shield against defeat and failure. It revives ideals and dreams. **As long as there is hope, no situation is impossible.** Advent summons us to wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. In the final analysis, he is our hope!