

First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2008, Year B

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

"The King Is Coming!"

First, let me say "Happy New Year!" That's right: "Happy New Year!" Today is the first Sunday of the new church year – the First Sunday of Advent. When I think of Advent - I can't help but think of a particular song from the musical "Godspell" in which the character of John the Baptist kept singing a haunting melody of "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" You know - that is what the season of Advent is all about – preparing – because the King is coming!

We begin a season of preparation, of waiting, anticipating and hoping for the coming of the King – Jesus Christ, who, alone, saves us from everything that is trying to destroy us. Advent is a time in which we are seeking and searching for hope - or at least a break from the fear that tries to surround and engulf our daily lives. In light of that anticipation – it would be good for us to hold onto these words from our first reading today from the Prophet Isaiah calling out to God: "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.*" In answer to that prayer, Jesus stepped into this world when He was born of Mary, to save us – and He is coming again – to reign forever!

We read in today's Gospel of Mark – Our Lord's description of the difficulties and fearful events that are facing the world and we know some of the apprehension that comes along with those signs - and so we must look to our source of hope. Jesus offers these words filled with hope and truth in **Mark 13:31** "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.*" We know that these words are faithful and true, and they give us hope and direction for the days ahead. Jesus' words tell us that His word, the Word of God, is eternal, trustworthy and true – and that we need to be about spreading and delivering His Word to the world. That is an integral part of our preparation! We must be about getting into and staying in the Word of God.

In Mark, chapter 4 - Jesus' principal message is for us to "*Listen.*" Jesus says: "*Let anyone with ears to hear listen.*" Ironically enough, Jesus is surrounded by people who are unwilling to listen; people who are unwilling to listen to Jesus or to hear what He is really saying. They refuse to hear **the actual voice of God** speaking of a new way of living, a purpose for creation that is not based upon power and violence. To truly "listen" is to listen through the ears of Jesus Christ, through His heart, and to hear the cries of those in need and hear that true power comes in doing service for others. **How many of us have prayed to be able to hear with Jesus' ears?**

Today's Gospel reading is part of a lesson which is often called Jesus' "Olivet discourse." The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke relay accounts of Jesus' teaching on the Mount of Olives. In this lesson from Mark, chapter 13, Jesus' principal message is for His followers to "Watch – to stand guard." Jesus tells us to "*Keep alert, keep awake!*" His message stresses the need for us to open our eyes and see the world as God sees the world. Pray that God would allow you to have the eyes of Jesus Christ to see the world as it really is; to see the events of the world as Jesus sees them. In the midst of terror, we must recognize that God is there; He is not only in control, but He has a plan to help us through it. We also need to have eyes to recognize evil for what it is. Evil is from the enemy and it is nothing more than an empty promise which is totally meaningless. Meaning and purpose to life can only be found only in the One who created the world; the One who promises to save all those who look to Him in times of terror, distress and heartache – and to trust totally in Him.

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In Mark 13:24-25, Jesus' words begin with what many perceive to be foreboding and terror. He says: "*But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken.*"

These are indeed frightening events, but they may well seem insignificant in light of the terror that faces the world today. At just the mere mention of September 11 all of our minds race with images and our own personal memories of that time. Each one of us has personal stories regarding that day.

- We have seen the terror that has crept onto our safe homeland.
- We live daily with the prospect of war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and even the events of the last few days in India.
- Every week we hear of another terrorist plot, or a young person willing to die for a cause killing everyone around.
- We learn about child predators and people who live to instill fear and pain on others simply for their own pleasure.
- We know the terror that lives on our own streets - where we fear walking alone after dark.
- We know the terrors of diseases that strike in spite of amazing advances in medicine, in spite of the best efforts of people to keep healthy.
- We know terror in a culture that is proving to be nothing but toxic to our children.

No, we don't need images of darkened skies and falling stars to know terror – we are living amongst it!

But in answer to this terror, Jesus warns us to "*Beware, keep alert!*" Jesus is telling us to not be held hostage to seeing things as the forces of evil want you to see." Watch! Keep alert!

- See things as God wants us see them.
- See God in the midst of all this terror as He is promising us hope.
- My brothers and sisters, we must recognize that only God gives life meaning.

Life is not defined by the fear or the threat from the enemy - who wants to scare us, to throw us off track or even to try to control us. We need to recognize evil for what it is, and recognize that **God is with us and that He is at work even in the midst of all the evil**. So let me remind you once again - that **each one of us should be asking God to give us eyes to see as He does**; asking to see people and things as He does. We need to see in a new way; to keep awake and aware to God's way of seeing.

Jesus indeed reminds us that the time is coming, that none of us knows, in which the King is coming – and we must be ready, we must prepare. It is time to broaden our vision. It's time to stop looking over our shoulders for those who threaten us and instead for us to see the broken ones who need God;

- who need His healing and mercy;
- who need the comfort of His Word.

Each and every person needs to have God in their life. We are created to know, love and worship God. When someone does not know God - they are left with a large "black hole" in their life – and many seek to wreak havoc in the lives of others.

Knowing God, serving Him and worshipping Him is what we as the church, the community of believers in fellowship –are called to do - to come together and grow – and to step out together

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in love, in new ways of sharing Christ's love with the community around us. We are being given an opportunity to start anew as St. Bartholomew's Christian Church – a fellowship of Anglican believers – to look for new ways and new opportunities in sharing Christ's love; and to live the truth that can only be found in His holy Word. We can make a difference by being an example to others in the way we live – based on God's example in His Holy Word. We need to let Christ's light shine in us – by inviting others to come to our new church – and to experience God's Word in action!

To *watch, to keep alert or awake* is to open our eyes and see God active in our world. Next Sunday – St. Bartholomew's will be blessed to be visited by Fr. Marc Jacobson and his wife Suzanne, who are missionaries in Capul, the Philippines. They not only minister to the people there, but they train men and women to translate the Word of God into the native language. Indeed they are opening the light of the Word of God to the people of the Philippines – one page at a time. It is exciting that Fr. Marc will be preaching next Sunday and that at a special coffee hour, after the 11 AM service, both Suzanne and Fr. Marc will be sharing with us as well. An information page about their ministry can be found on the table in the Narthex. Please be sure to take one!

Psalm 80, which we prayed together today, reminds us of the cry of the people to Almighty God: *"Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved."* The Prophet Isaiah declares to the Lord God to come and save His people: *"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil -- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!"* People have been crying out for God to save them – and many missed it! They missed the fact that **He alone is the hope of the hopeless!**

Indeed, God did step into history – in the person of His Blessed Son, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but the people didn't recognize the King – instead they ridiculed, rejected, and murdered Him. They hung Him from a cross - BUT – God's promises cannot be destroyed – Jesus rose from the dead – and is ALIVE today! Remember, God DID promise that His King would reign. When Jesus the King, comes again– His followers will have nothing to fear – but instead to rejoice that He has come to reign over them and draw them to Himself for all eternity. Jesus said in the Gospel of Mark 13:26 *"Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory."* **There will be no mistaking this event – none whatsoever! What will be fearful to many – or as Isaiah said *"that the nations might tremble at your presence,"* will be a means for those who know Jesus – to see Him face to face and worship their King!** His words are true – and you can take that to the bank! Jesus also told us that *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."* (Mark 13:31) **It is in His Words that we can put our trust, and know that He is as good as His promises.**

Jesus made it all the more clear when He told us in John 5:24-27 *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man."*

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The King is coming – and we can be filled with hope at the thought of His coming, and I know that I cannot wait!

We enter this season of Advent, a time of anticipation before the festive season of Christmas that is to come; we also need to recognize it as a time of anticipation for **the One WHO IS TO COME again**. We see all around us things that give us false hope and false meaning to our lives. Those things are not where our hope lies. As followers of Jesus Christ, we long for the coming of the One who promises release to the captives, gives sight to the blind, and faith in Him brings hope for you and me in the midst of all that would incite terror in us today.

- The hope for the world is not found in the promises of politicians and world leaders.
- Indeed, the hope for the world is found in One who came as a vulnerable child into this world,
- in One who knows our fears and terrors and cries with us in the midst of the terror, but also shows us a way through the terror to hope.
- It is Jesus who has the power to destroy the powers that destroy people! He is coming – the King is coming!

We are not supposed to blindly ignore what is happening in the world today. True, we need to think about the events, but instead we are to watch them with new eyes – which are illuminated in the light of the hope – the light of the Gospel. Watch, Keep awake, the Savior of the world is about to return and in that is great hope! The King is coming!