

First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2005, Liturgical Year "B"

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

The Rev. Deacon John E. Commins, Curate

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

"While You Are Waiting..."

While you are waiting....

Ok – its time to get personal – let me ask you a very personal question. How are you with patience? One person calls patience "wait-training." Doesn't it seem that there is always something we are waiting for? We wait:

- In traffic
- We wait in lines.
- We wait to get in to see the Doctor or Dentist
- We wait at airports
- We wait for servers to take our orders, and then we wait for the food to come. Let's not even talk about waiting for the check!
- We wait to hear about a new job.
- We wait to complete school or to retire.
- We wait to grow up or for maturity in a child.
- We wait for a decision to be made.
- We invariably wait for test results, and
- We can wait for someone to change his or her mind.
- I know that I am trying to be patient, waiting for my ordination to the priesthood on December 11.

Waiting is not easy! Remember how difficult it was for the Apostles to wait and remain awake even for one hour while Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane?

Patience while waiting is a most important quality of a happy life. After all, some things are worth waiting for – aren't they? Every day presents plenty of opportunities for "wait training."

We can resent waiting, detest it, accept it or even get good at it! But one thing is certain - **we cannot avoid it.** *How is your wait training coming along?*

In Mark's Gospel - chapter 13:24-37 - Jesus' words predict His return – His second coming. Jesus stresses the importance of being prepared, ready and alert. Jesus' words remind us that we do not know God's timetable. **We do not even have a clue!**

We just need to prepare and be ready when Jesus comes, ready in our homes, ready in the workplace, ready in our church, ready in our lives as Jesus returns in great power and glory as Savior and Judge. This is a pretty stern warning to us that this world will end in God's time, not ours. We have absolutely no say in the matter.

Just prior to these words, Jesus warns us against false prophets who will lead people astray – and if possible, they will lead the church astray.

Is it possible that we are witnessing that very thing happening - even as we speak? Leaders are changing meanings, reinterpreting or even omitting parts of Holy Scripture as God's Word for us, and then even going so far as denying Jesus Christ, His divinity or His living, dying, and rising again – for our sins.

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Waiting is tough – and with the instant society that we live in, it is getting tougher all the time. Time has become so important – mostly that we do not want to waste it. We have fast food – drive up ATM's, drive through restaurants, drive through car washes – I don't even want to think about what's next. Time is of the essence – but did you know that, according to a survey,

- the average business executive spends about 60 hours a year on hold on the telephone. He/she also spends 32 minutes a day reading and writing unnecessary memos. That computes to 128 hours a year. That same executive spends an hour and 12 minutes a day at unnecessary meetings, and that computes to 288 hours a year.

So, while we wait for the Lord's return, how is it that we can prepare and be ready?

First – we need to be obedient to God's Holy Word – both written and Incarnate. Both are precious gifts to humanity. Jesus' words are given to us so that we may believe and through grateful obedience serve others. He is the ONLY way, truth and life – besides Him there are no others.

There is an emphasis in Jesus' words that every day can be a day of the Lord, bringing good news to the poor, healing, praying for and ministering to our brothers and sisters who are captives or oppressed. This can happen if we use the blessing and power given to us with His compassion and mercy, opening ourselves to be instruments of God's purpose, showing His love to others, and at the same time being obedient to his word. Remember - He told us that "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*" (Mark 13:31)

Traditionally, the first Sunday in Advent has readings scheduled which ask us to be attentive to the fact that we are in the end-times, and that Jesus' coming again may be near, very near. This particular reading brings into question the dimensions of human time. There is no timetable of final events provided here by Mark. The significant issues are of the present and the future call for a response through the obedience and willingness of the disciples to follow Jesus. The appointed time will not come about without our involvement – obediently following not only the Great Commandment – but the Great Commission as well. We are called to use the gifts that God has given us, some as apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. (Ephesians 4:11) Some are even called to be encouragers to the others.

A little over 2 years ago I had the privilege of working with The Rev. Michael Green and his wife Rosemary on an evangelistic mission. Michael is quite a lively Englishman, well known as an author and evangelist. He was at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, leading me and my classmates through this event as we went to the streets, to churches, and to homes giving our testimonies and bringing God's Word to others. This was a week long event that culminated with a free lunch and party at the seminary, where the whole Ambridge community was invited. At the end of the week, Michael and Rosemary held a meeting with the students to talk about what we experienced. Michael was somewhat dejected because his expectations of people making a commitment to the Lord were much higher than the numbers that actually did. I listened attentively and watched Michael struggle with the results. Here was this man who had led and participated in events where hundreds, if not thousands made the decision of a lifetime – struggling with the results of one week in Ambridge. I felt led to speak to him afterward, that the Lord wanted me to tell him that the week was not about numbers of saved, but about teaching us to make nets – teaching us to become fishers of mankind. In that instant - his entire week turned around – his perspective changed – and he could see that it was a

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time of training, of mentoring, of modeling the ministry of the seminarians and their families. It was about the fruit of that labor that would help to grow the kingdom of God.

While we are waiting... we should be learning about and using each one of the gifts that we are entrusted with by the Holy Spirit - and given the opportunity to be responsible for others, refusing to be lulled into the false security of this age. We need to live as if the return of Jesus is just around the corner, only a moment or heartbeat away -- and to recognize that the signs of his presence are with us now.

When it comes to being on the alert and ready at any moment to do the job, it's hard to beat the Pony Express. This historically famous mail service between St. Joseph, Missouri, and California depended on constant movement and readiness. Relay stations were established every ten to fifteen miles. A rider would shout aloud as he approached a station, giving the station master very short notice that he needed to be outside waiting with a fresh mount. Even when a rider came to the station where he was to spend the night, another rider was already mounted and waiting, ready to grab the first rider's bundle of packages and continue the trip.

The completion of the transcontinental telegraph system rendered the Pony Express obsolete after just eighteen months. But we have this service's intriguing example of what it means to be ever watchful, Jesus used two parables to teach us the value of readiness and watchfulness as His servants.

Months of planning go into:

- a wedding,
- the birth of a baby,
- a career change,
- a speaking engagement,
- the purchase of a home.

So ... do you place the same degree of importance on preparing for Christ's return - the most important event in your life? Its results will last for eternity. I think it is safe to say that we dare not postpone or put off our preparations because we do not know when Jesus' return will occur.

The way to prepare is:

- to study God's Word and live by its instructions each day;
- remain morally alert and
- avoid the spiritual sluggishness Paul warned about in 1 Thessalonians 5:6 ,
- to keep awake – to keep alert and sober.

It is most important that we refuse to be distracted from doing the work or fulfilling the role that God has assigned to you. I know that is easier said than done – but as Christians we are called to be the Body of Christ – and He will strengthen us and guide us. The words of Isaiah 40:31 remind us that *“those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”*

The entire thirteenth chapter of Mark tells us how to live while we wait for Christ's return:

- We are not to be misled by confusing claims or speculative interpretations of what will happen.
- We should not be afraid to tell people about Christ, despite what they might say or do to us.

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- We must stand firm by faith and not be surprised by persecution.
- We must be morally alert,
- Obedient to the commands for living found in God's Word.

Chapter 13 from the Gospel of Mark was not given to promote discussions on prophetic timetables, but to stimulate right living for God in a world where He is largely ignored. Look around – we saw the Thanksgiving Parade on TV - people were singing that they are so thankful – but they NEVER say to whom they are thankful! Jesus' purpose was to warn us to be prepared. Will you be ready? As we prepare not only for the upcoming Christmas season, but for Jesus' return, the only safe choice is to obey him *today*. Time is indeed running out!