

The First Sunday of Advent + November 27, 2011

Keep awake! You do not know when the Master returns ... (Mark 13)

I have this Doctor who is really good at what he does. In addition to his skills as a physician and surgeon which are considerable, he has a wonderful code of ethics around the way he treats his patients. He doesn't want them to spend too much time in the waiting room. There is a sign posted in the waiting room that says as much. It is part of the core values of this particular medical practice. Sure enough, in visit after visit I probably spent no more than five minutes waiting before going into see the doctor. Well, there was that one time. Much to the doctor's consternation and much to my surprise, things got backed up and I waited one day for more than an hour. That was the exception, not the norm. Since I didn't expect that to happen I didn't bring with me anything to read or paper work to wade through or my cell phone to do any kind of text messaging. So, I had no choice but to read the magazines on the center table and once that was done, I had nothing to do. So, I watched. I watched other patients come and go and I watched the doctor's staff do its job. I found myself, out of sheer boredom, taking note of things I normally don't see – the color of the paint on the wall, the designs on the wall paper, the window looking as though it needed to be cleaned. I even began to see the very top corner of the wall paper that was beginning to peel. It is amazing what we see or focus upon when we have nothing else to do. We begin to see things we normally do not see.

Here we are on the first Sunday in Advent and what are we called to do? We are called to wait. Oh, great! Waiting is something we try to avoid because we imagine waiting to be a waste of time. Maybe, though, just maybe, there's some wisdom in waiting. When we take the time to wait we may begin to see things we normally do not see.

We must admit that as Christians, during this time of the year, we really live in two worlds simultaneously. We live in one world where Christmas officially began on Friday. I suspect most, if not all of us, are affected in one way or another, by that world of holiday consumerism. It's a world that can be pretty busy and full, not only with shopping, but with parties and activities and, yes, a good number of

charitable causes and events. There's a lot going on in that world. It tends to be a rather noisy world.

At the same time we live in the world marked by longing, waiting, anticipation and yearning. That funky and odd season observed by Christians called Advent. And in Advent we slow down, take our time, and don't rush into anything. It is intentionally a quiet time. The light doesn't all come at once. The light appears gradually and takes time before it becomes full circle. In one world Christmas has already begun. In the other world Christmas doesn't begin until December 24.

I think we ride the tension of living in both worlds. I know I do. And what would it look like this year, while riding that tension to err on the side of the Advent world? What would it look like to just slow down and wait? What if we were to look upon these next four weeks, not as a race to Christmas or even a countdown to Christmas, but a time to *linger in the waiting room*? And while we linger in the waiting room, dwell in hope. The color blue during Advent is the color hope. The leaner liturgy and less crowded space is a call to wait for something that has not yet fully appeared. This is all about dwelling in hope and hope isn't the same thing as wishing.

We tend to use these words interchangeably: Sometimes we'll say "Be careful what you hope for" or "Be careful of what you wish for," as though they were the same. But I think that is where we get confused. Hoping and wishing are not the same. We all wish for many things. When I was a little kid, I was taught to make a wish before blowing out the candles on my birthday cake. On Thursday I waded through the very large edition of the newspaper which was mostly advertisements for all the "Black Friday" sales I found myself wishing for many things. And our wishes are not always futile. Sometimes they are quite noble. We wish for many things. We wish for better health, better jobs, and better relationships. We may even wish for world peace.

But, hope is very different. Hope you see calls us to come to the waiting room without a wish list. Hope is open-ended. Hope bids us to come before God open and vulnerable. Hope is trusting in God to do a new thing and what God may do may have little or nothing to do with what we wish for. It might even run contrary to our wishes. God might end up even frustrating our wishes and

expectations. God has a way of acting in ways that are far removed from what we expect or wish for. Dare we spend time with hope? Dare we spend time in the waiting room of Advent?

But, what if ... what if, in the next four weeks, as we linger in the waiting room that is Advent we were let go of our wishes?

What if we were to let go of our wishes?

When I hear the complaint of God's people in today's first lesson, I hear a desperate cry of hope. "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Here is the cry of God's people who been abandoned and have found their homeland temple in ruins are eager for God to do something ... anything, but to do something. And were they even open to God doing an alien thing, different than what they might wish for? ***Are we prepared to allow God to surprise us?***

Over the next four Sundays our opening prayer, the Prayer of the Day, will begin with two little words: Stir up. Today we prayed to God to stir up God's power and come. Next we pray that our hearts will be stirred. ON the following Sunday we pray that God will stir up the wills of the faithful and finally on the Fourth Sunday in Advent we pray that God will indeed, again, stir up God's power and come.

Dare we pray that kind of prayer?

And if we do, we had better pay attention. We had better be alert and present and not be distracted, even by our wishes. Now, this does not mean we sit around not in the waiting room merely twiddling our thumbs. To pay attention is to wait expectantly on tip-toe, anticipating something new and exciting and life-giving and maybe even a little scary.

The late Henri Nouwen described this posture as active waiting: "Active waiting means to be fully present in the moment – something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is the moment."

I think keeping awake or paying attention is precisely that. Instead of rushing ahead to the next thing, to wait with purpose is to stay awake in the moment. What might that look like for you as you over the next four weeks?

I have some suggestions: Come to the Taize' service tonight or again in two weeks to be soaked in prayer ... come to our midweek Advent services ... make room for silence in your life ... turn off the TV or radio; fast from the computer or texting or the cell phone ... by God's grace be fully present through the gift of prayer. Or, be fully present by being present to another. Listen to that person with whom listening has been a real chore. Be present to the person you struggle with the most or one with whom you disagree, to see the person who is different as your sister or brother ... when you find yourself waiting in long lines at the Post office or at Target or Macy's instead of thinking about the next thing you need to do or getting annoyed, why don't you take it as an opportunity to pray?

What will it look like for you to focus not so much on you wish for but to enter into that radical land of hope which might find your crying out to God, or waiting expectantly for God on tip-toe, eager to have God reveal something about God's self to you that is brand new. I invite you to dwell in the waiting room that is Advent.

I wonder if you will see something you haven't before seen or notice something you've never before noticed? Can we linger in the waiting room that is Advent and even let go of our wishes. Who knows what new thing may take place. You might even be changed.