

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, Year B
November 27, 2005 — Mark 13:24-27
Fr. Jim Cook

Christ: Here, there, and everywhere.

Happy new year! Today is the first day of the church's calendar, as well as the first day of the season of Advent. And nothing expresses the paradox of Christian faith and belief as much as this season. For not only are we looking forward to the celebration of the birthday of Jesus, but we are also looking forward to the return of Jesus, as today's reading from Mark's gospel describes it, "with great power and glory." We celebrate not only the day that Jesus came to earth, but we also anticipate the day he will return.

At times like this, it's hard to keep these two events in balance. And today's reading from Mark's gospel does nothing to help us with that balancing act. Let's hear part of it again:

"In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

Mark 13:24-26.

It's an impressive description, but easy to misunderstand. Because one of the things we have to remember is that, in the years immediately following Jesus' death and resurrection, the church expected him to return *at any moment*. We can see this high state of expectation throughout Paul's writings. But by the time Mark wrote his gospel, some forty years have passed with no sign of Jesus' return, and the church was beginning to lose hope. And, to add insult to injury, only a few years before Mark wrote his gospel, the city of Jerusalem, the eternal city of God, had been destroyed by the Roman armies. But where was Jesus?

And so, Mark is addressing those concerns and fears and doubts, with the very words we've just heard. And what most of us miss, but which Mark's readers would have picked up on, is the fact that Mark is quoting from a number of Old Testament prophets, to reassure the church that, despite the things they've seen taking place, Jesus *will* return.

But even though the early church was looking for Jesus to return, still they embraced the belief of their Jewish forebears that God is everywhere. I'm sure you remember these words:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. *Psalms 139:7-10.*

Therefore, the early church lived with that very same paradox that we still live with: knowing that God is always with us, but still looking forward to the return of God's Son "with great power and glory." And that's a lot of what the season of Advent is about: exposing this paradox, this tension, and even celebrating it.

However, I still wish the editors of our Prayer Book could have selected something a bit, well, lighter, for the principal reading on this first Sunday in Advent – something other than, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven.” Why couldn’t we start this season with something that’s not quite so gloomy but, I think, just as accurate, like this:

From there to here,
from here to there,
funny things
are everywhere.

Of course, I’m quoting from Dr. Seuss, who published these words in his book, One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish. It’s a good book and, as I’ve discovered over the years, a fairly quick read.

Now, I’m pretty sure the good doctor never expected to have his words quoted in a sermon about the season of Advent; nevertheless, his words are timely.

From there to here,
from here to there,
funny things
are everywhere.

And the funny thing we Christians understand as being everywhere is none other than Jesus. Yes, indeed, we await his coming “with great power and glory,” but he is, at the same time, already here, and there, and everywhere. He is already in our midst. But we often fail to see him because, as he has been elsewhere described, the master of a million disguises.

A few years ago, it was reported that a miracle took place in Bethlehem, at the Church of the Nativity, which is built on the traditional site of Christ’s birth. If you’ve been there (and I had that pleasure during the summer of 1988), then you’ll know that it’s a lovely place filled with altars and candles and incense and icons. Apparently, several years ago, some worshipers saw one of the icons of Jesus winking at them. That’s right, an icon of Jesus was winking at some of the people gathered there. Now, the skeptic in me wants to doubt; after all, I’ve been there, and I didn’t see any winking icons. But, if it did actually happen, then one eyewitness seems to have understood the significance of it all. “He moved his eyelid up and down several times,” the witness reported. “This is a message from God that he is everywhere.”

And that’s the point of Advent, isn’t it, to remind us that God is everywhere. To assure us that Jesus is everywhere, and to remind us to occasionally stop watching the sun, moon and stars, to stop looking up and out, and remember, now and then, to look down and all around us. Because, whether or not we believe that an old icon in a famous church actually winked at a number of worshipers, the truth is that the living Christ winks at us all the time, and in places we least expect to see him.

Remember, the season of Advent may begin in the heavens, with a story describing how the sun and moon lose their light, and how the stars fall from the sky. But it ends in a stable, with a story of how a father and mother are caring for their newborn baby boy. And this gives us a hint of where we need to begin our search for the winking Jesus; in the love of parents for their children.

And today's reading from 1st Corinthians gives us yet another hint. Although that letter has been attributed only to St. Paul, the opening lines of that letter inform us that it is in fact from Paul, and someone named Sosthenes. We first learned of Sosthenes in Acts. At one time, Sosthenes was the leader of the synagogue in Corinth, and on one occasion he filed charges against Paul with the Roman government. In other words, at one time, Paul and Sosthenes were bitter rivals and enemies. However, the "grace and peace" of God transformed these two enemies into fast friends and companions. And here we find Jesus winking at us; when enemies and rivals become friends and companions.

Now, I could give you another example, but I want to leave this up to you. This will be your homework during Advent: look for Jesus. Look for him in your home, in your places of work; in your schools, in the shopping malls, and in the grocery stores. But don't be like the wise men, who sought Jesus by looking at the stars. Rather, be like the shepherds, who found Jesus lying in a simple manger. Which is to say, if we look for Jesus in the miracle, we'll likely miss him in the mundane.

And remember the words of Dr. Seuss:

From there to here,
from here to there,
funny things
are everywhere.

Or, as he might have written them for this new season of Advent:

From there to here,
from here to there,
the Son of God
is everywhere.

Amen.