

JOURNEY OF ENCOURAGEMENT¹
Mark 13: 32-37
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
November 27, 2011

The day after Thanksgiving is Black Friday, considered the busiest shopping day of the year and traditionally the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. Its name, Black Friday, indicates the point at which retailers begin to turn a profit, as in being “in the black.”

Now there is a new significance to the day after Thanksgiving. The National Day of Listening is a day when Americans are asked to set aside time to listen to the stories of families and friends. It originated in 2008 by the national oral history project called StoryCorps. Few things are more encouraging than to have someone really listen to you.

I

We all have our stories to tell, and many of us can remember times of sitting on the porch listening to family stories, or hearing stories told by family members after Thanksgiving dinner, or discovering stories about a family member at a funeral. From the time we were children and begged our parents to “Tell me a story,” to adulthood when we love good storytellers like Garrison Keiller, we are filled with stories.

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, November 27, 2011.

Mitch Carnell, a communications specialist and teacher of speech, reminds us that the Bible is basically a storybook and that Jesus was remembered as a storyteller. We still tell the stories of Jesus after all these years, and we still argue about what they mean. Mitch Carnell speaks of multiple interpretations of the Prodigal Son story to illustrate his point!²

One way of thinking about the experience of being the church is that it is a merging of stories. You have a story and I have a story. They were once separate stories, but in being church together, our stories begin to merge. Soon our private life stories begin to be OUR life story—not just MY story and YOUR story. I can always tell when the merger takes place in church: it is when someone stops using the term “your church” and begins to use the term “our church.”

I can say to the newcomers to this church community that this congregation is an alliance of faithful friends and colleagues seriously trying to follow the way of Christ. That does not mean that we are all in agreement over every issue. It simply means that we have concluded that following the way of Christ is more important than any other issue.

² Mitch Carnell, “Listening—a Gift We Don’t Use Often Enough,” at www.ethicsdaily.com.

If you are looking for a church home, a place that will gather you in and accept you as you are, a place that will nurture you along your own spiritual journey and call out your best gifts, then you are in the right place! There is no such thing as a perfect church, just as there is no perfect job or perfect person. I think it was Charles Spurgeon who quipped that “the day we find a perfect church, it becomes imperfect the moment we join it!”

II

Now what about this gospel text for this first Sunday of Advent? *Keep awake!* it urges. Has it ever seemed odd to you that on the first Sunday of Advent each year, when we begin looking toward the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the lectionary text used all over the Christian world is about the Second Coming of Jesus? Just when we are beginning to focus on the first coming, we get a text focused on the Second Coming!

Most of us aren't even sure what we believe or want to believe about such things, especially since we have heard so many wild-eyed abuses of such texts. But here it is nevertheless, and the church all over the world is reading this text urging us to stay alert.

Just a few reminders in reading a text like this: apocalyptic language is always picture-talk. We don't have to turn this text over to the literalists.

Sometimes Jesus used picture-talk, metaphorical language. We have to use picture-talk when we speak of ultimate things. We have no other language for it. Here we are talking about the end of time as we know it. We certainly can't be confined to rational logic when we speak of such things.

Another reminder about apocalyptic language: it always arises during times of crisis. No wonder we hear more of it these days! The text we read today comes out of the first great crisis in the life of the early church. When the gospel of Mark was compiled, the first great wave of persecution of Christians had begun, and the little congregations that had been meeting in relative safety suddenly had to flee to the hills to survive. Out of that despair and crisis of faith came this gospel.

The author of the gospel of Mark gathered together all the authentic sayings of Jesus he or she could find, and placed them in some coherent order to compile what we believe to be the first of the four gospels to be written. (Please do not be thrown when I say "he or she." The gospel of Mark is anonymous. We really don't know who wrote it.) In the midst of a crisis of faith, this gospel stood as a witness to a faithful God whose presence is made known even in the midst of crisis.

So this unique, sometimes even strange apocalyptic language, is always a language of hope. The gospel of Mark was reminding those Christians who

had almost lost hope, that in spite of all, God was, God is, and God will be. That is to say, apocalyptic language is a language of encouragement.

III

An editorial in one paper this week described Americans as “glum and gloomy.”³ Apocalyptic language is written to those who are tempted to be glum and gloomy. It is written as a work of encouragement, not fear. It has reminded readers from the 1st century to the 21st century that our ultimate hope does not lie in the Dow index; it does not lie in the military; it does not rest on the results of political elections; it does not rely on housing prices or budgets or the economic crisis in Greece or Italy. All of these measures reflect daily levels of hopefulness at times, but are not the ultimate source of hope.

Our ultimate hope does not come from these things. In the most difficult of times, Jesus said not only to watch for signs of hope, but to be especially watchful when it is the darkest of times. Here is how he put it: *Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.* Surely his language was deliberately chosen. The Roman military divided the night into four watches. The evening watch was 6:00 – 9:00 PM; the midnight watch was 9:00 – midnight. The cockcrow watch was from midnight to 3:00 AM. And the

³ Roger Cohen, “Decline and Fall,” New York Times, November 21, 2011.

morning or “dawn” watch was from 3:00 – 6:00 AM. Those were the darkest times, times when there is no sign of a bright future. That is when we are warned to keep alert.

Jesus was saying that there is a future even in the darkest of times, and at the conclusion of that future, there is God—the same God who was with us in the past and is with us now. Christian faith is realistic; it sees the world situation as clearly as anyone else. But we do not and we will not participate in the “glum and gloomy” atmosphere described in the editorial. We are a people of hope, even in the most challenging times, because our ultimate hope is not dependent on that list of issues that normally comprises the content of the evening news.

IV

It is quite a journey we are taking together as a church. We are at the dawn of a third century, and the future is encouraging. Some of us will stumble and fall along the way. Some of us may lag behind or bolt ahead, but we are taking this journey together because we need each other, and because we are a people of hope. It is a journey toward hope and with hope.

At the entrance to Dante’s Inferno was the sign, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here!” At the entrance to this church is a more encouraging word: “All hope claim and celebrate, ye who enter here!” We journey under the

banner of faith, hope, and love. Here we sing “O God, Our Help in Ages Past, our hope for years to come.” Here we declare a word of encouragement for the present and a word of hope that will never die.