

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Year B
November 27, 2011
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37
Pastor David Tryggestad
Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church
Duluth, Minnesota

“Guess where we’re going on Black Friday?”

It was my wife asking the question, and I knew by the inflection in her voice and the challenging gaze of her stare that it was not really a question, because she already knew the answer. “Guess where we’re going on Black Friday!”

The worst part of the challenge was that it was made in public. I was sitting in the midst of the good people of our Senior Choir, enjoying homemade soup made by the director, Kristin Peterson, downstairs in the Fellowship Hall this past Tuesday before the evening Thanksgiving Service. I had to be careful not to overact in the presence of my parishioners!

“Guess where we’re going on Black Friday?”

I think I said something like, “We’ll be in Apple Valley visiting your family for Thanksgiving. Then we’ll be coming back home on Friday.”

Then my wife said, “We’re going to the Mall of America on Black Friday.”

What?! How could this be? I have never been to the Mall of America, and I have no desire *ever* to go to the Mall of America, especially on Black Friday. How could this be?

I managed not to choke on my soup and I said something like, “Why?” “*Why* are we going to the Mall of America on Black Friday?”

My wife continued, “Because I pulled a tag off the Giving Tree at East High School, and the girl wants an American Girl doll, the Native American model, named ‘Kaya.’” Feebly I asked, “But why do we have to go to the Mall of America?”

“Because it’s the only store in Minnesota that sells it.”

My heart sank. I had been looking forward to a lovely, quiet gathering of family for Thanksgiving. Now the trip was turning into a nightmare of fighting anxious, desperate shoppers on the busiest shopping day of the entire year.

As it turns out, we did *not* go to the Mall of America this past Friday. Instead, this past Wednesday, I went online and ordered the doll, which will come in the mail. I gladly paid

the extra shipping costs to avoid going to the Mall of America. I noted in the paper yesterday that 150,000 shoppers streamed into the Mall of America by 4 p.m. on Black Friday. Had we gone, it would have been 150,002 shoppers. Fortunately, there were no reports of shoppers being assaulted by another shopper with pepper spray, as happened in a store in Los Angeles on Black Friday. Maybe that has something to do with “Minnesota Nice.”

All those 150,000 shoppers added their numbers to the millions across the country who were getting ready for Christmas.

The Church is also getting ready for Christmas, but we do it very differently.

In our gospel for today, Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for the end times. He urges them to *keep alert* and to *keep awake*. It is like a man going on a journey, putting his servants in charge. They are to *keep alert* and to *keep awake* for his return, lest he come home and find them asleep: “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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.”

Jesus knows what he’s talking about. His little parable introduces what happens within the next 24 hours, structured around the times Jesus announces: in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, and at dawn. That very evening Jesus and his disciples will sit down over the Passover meal in what came to be his “Last Supper”; at midnight, he will be in the Garden of Gethsemane praying fervently to his Father while his weary disciples repeatedly give in to sleep, and the Romans will come to arrest him; at cockcrow, Jesus’ most boastful disciple, Peter, will have denied him three times; and at dawn Jesus will stand before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court, who will take him to Pilate to be tried and crucified. Jesus knows what he is talking about.

Thus there is urgency in Jesus’ admonition: “Keep alert; keep awake!”

There is urgency in the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, our Second Lesson for today, “. . . as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. [God] will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

But in Paul, the language of urgency has shifted from “keep watch, keep awake,” as Jesus says, to the *recognition and utilization of the gifts* the community has been given:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind . . . so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait . . .”

Paul talks about the Church as the fellowship of God’s Son: “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” As Paul goes on to

spell out in this first letter to the Corinthians, the members of the Church are to use their gifts to build up the fellowship, or, to use Paul's metaphor, to build up the Body of Christ.

We at Concordia are a fellowship of Jesus. God has given us gifts to enrich the fellowship, and, according to Paul, we are not lacking in anything we need. In stark contrast to the secular world, where the notion of scarcity permeates and motivates everything, Paul invites us to consider the notion of abundance: “. . . you are not lacking in any spiritual gift . . .” One of the spiritual gifts Paul talks about elsewhere is generosity. One of the marks of the fellowship of Jesus—of the Church—is generosity. Where the secular world announces scarcity—“you don't have enough!”—the fellowship of Jesus—the Church—practices generosity.

The 150,000 shoppers at the Mall of America on Friday were getting ready for Christmas. And they joined the millions of other shoppers on that day, many of whom were lined up for hours to get into the stores. They had a sense of urgency about them.

There is a disconnect between the way the secular culture gets ready for Christmas and the way the Church gets ready for Christmas is great. But there is at least one feature of the secular preparation that all of us in the Church might benefit from: the sense of urgency.

Jesus and the Apostle Paul would say to us, “Keep awake for ways to use and to share your gifts for the building up of the fellowship of Jesus, and, by extension, to demonstrate an alternative way to live. Rather than anxiety, show joy. Rather than hostility, love. Rather than fear, hope. Rather than scarcity, abundance.

Yesterday morning I met with a couple planning their wedding for next summer. When we had sat together for almost two hours and were wrapping up our time together, I asked if they had any prayer requests we might include in our prayer together. The groom (not a member of Concordia) told me about his aunt Julie, who has just been diagnosed with a life-threatening kind of lymphoma. Julie's daughter is pregnant with what will be Julie's first grandchild. Another daughter is getting married next July. Julie has much to live for.

As I wrote this sermon last night, I thought about Julie and the attitude she might have toward the weeks and months to come. I can imagine she will live each day to the fullest. She will keep awake for every sign of life and every sign of God's presence in her life. She will live with a sense of urgency. She will live with hope. While her days may be numbered (as indeed, all of our days are), I imagine she will live each one of them with a sense of abundance. Julie will live in Advent hope and expectancy.

This is the kind of Advent into which we are invited to live as the fellowship of Jesus and it is the kind of preparation for Christmas we have to show to the world.

Thanks be to God.