

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend Irene Tanabe

The First Sunday in Advent, July 31, 2011

Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Watching for Eternal Time

Do you ever have periods where things just seem out of sorts? That's how I was feeling the last couple of days. I didn't even know it was there. But as I spend the last couple of days living with the tension of the "not now" of sermon writing, I felt an underlying sadness. I went for a walk yesterday morning. It wasn't raining, just damp and overcast. I was surprised that as I walked through the fallen leaves that I could hear them crackling and rustling as my feet kicked the leaves away even though it looked like it would be just soggy and squishy. Still, it was a pretty gray day.

I ended up in my backyard vegetable garden; all brown with death and decay. So much to clean up! Thinking back to summer, it was not a successful year; past years have been much more productive. I smiled when I recalled the one summer when my now young adult son was just a little guy. We'd gone out to pick cucumbers and found a cucumber that we had missed. It was huge! He took it in and traced it on a sheet of paper, I suppose so that we could remember it forever. No, this year was not so good. The garden never recovered from the long cool spring. Standing under the bare branches of the fig tree today, unripe figs still cling to the branches. I cannot shake the feeling of melancholy that surrounds me as heavily as the Northwest dampness. It's a deep sadness, a feeling of emptiness and anxiety of the changing seasons and of time passing by.

St. Augustine wrestled with the concept of time in Book XI in *The Confessions*. He wrote that time depends on things passing away, things existing, and things arriving. He noted that if time is defined by things arriving, remaining for a moment, and passing away, then time seems to depend on a movement toward "non-being." St. Augustine asked:

If, then, time present--if it be time--comes into existence only because it passes into time past, how can we say that even this is, since the cause of its being is that it will cease to be? Thus, can we not truly say that time is only as it tends toward nonbeing?

Confessions, Book XI, 17.

Now we can laugh and say that Augustine was tying himself up in knots over a philosophical argument, but all of us can identify with the frustration of living in time that cannot be held still. And Augustine worked really hard to understand this anxiety:

...I confess to thee, O Lord, that I know that I am speaking all these things in time, and that I have already spoken of time a long time, and that "very long" is not long except when measured by the duration of time. How, then, do I know this, when I do not know what time is? Or, is it possible that I do not know how I can express what I do know? Alas for me! I do not even know the extent of my own ignorance. Behold, O my God, in thy presence I do not lie. As my heart is, so I speak. Thou shalt light my candle; thou, O Lord my God, wilt enlighten my darkness.

Confessions, Book XI, 32.

Augustine he came to understand, with God's help, that time can be measured in different ways and that it expands in a way that he described as a relationship with eternity.

Today's gospel, I believe, addresses our anxieties about time. But unlike Augustine, Jesus does so with such simplicity and beauty, it takes your breath away: "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things, you

know that he is near, at the very gates.” Jesus helps us to overcome the fear of empty time by pointing to the seasons, the cyclical sense of reality: Rather than thinking of time as linear with an unrepeatable beginning and an indefinite end, time begins again each year. Rather than struggling to create meaning in one unrepeatable moment in time to another, we find meaning in God’s eternal pattern. When we are cut off from eternal time, we spend our present time trying to hold on to these precious moments in linear time. We try to fill the emptiness with idols and false messiahs.

But time is not empty. From Genesis we know that God made creation, including humans, with a purpose: We are the clay, and God is our potter; we are the work of God’s hand. Mark tells us that time is far from empty. Over and over he proclaims that God’s reign is on the horizon. Evil is cast out, lives are healed, people are forgiven, and the gospel is full of the possibilities of life in its fullness. In those moments, there is no distinction between heaven and earth. Love of God and love of neighbor, these are the moments that give our lives meaning. And the more we use our gifts to bring the richness of God’s love to others, God’s reign will dawn in fullness for all.

So those are the tender moments we are to watch for as we keep alert and keep awake. Beware – is to be aware. Live your lives consciously, looking for those moments where we can make a difference, those moments where we will experience the eternal. It will require your vigilance for as soon as you think you’re on it, you will find yourself caught in an anxious melancholy as I found myself in yesterday. What took me out of that was when I came to the cathedral yesterday afternoon, and found a number of parishioners setting up the nave for the Advent season. One person was on her hands and knees, literally, as she cleaned the floor over here. This was a precious moment! I had to stop and think to myself, this is not an ordinary moment, but a very tender one, and Jesus was here with us.

Incidentally, the last time I preached, I talked about driving away from an accident scene

because I didn’t have my collar and prayer book and I felt powerless to help. I have a postscript. Three days after I preached, I was in Washington DC to attend the bestowing of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Japanese American Veterans of WWII. My father was one of the few elderly recipients still alive today. In the hotel, I came upon a group of people looking very distressed. Without playing any of those “tapes” in my head, I asked, “Is something wrong?” It turned out that their father didn’t come down for the ceremony so they came up to the room and found him dead. Without hesitation, I said: “I’m a priest. I can help.” I never stopped to think I wasn’t wearing my collar, no prayer book, no business card. I was able to sit with the family through this difficult time and deliver the prayers commending their father to his maker.

Can you recall those moments in your life when you experienced that something more was present, sacred moments that fill our lives with direction and meaning? There is no need to hang on anxiously to moments that are past. God’s reign is on the horizon. Remember, as Paul said to the Corinthians, “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of Lord Jesus Christ.” Bestow your gifts on others so that they also will grow to realize fullness of time. In this way, we will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.