

Reflections on the Scripture Readings for the First Sunday of Advent (November 29, 2020)
By Art Zannoni

First Reading Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

- The first reading is a combination of communal lament and prayer. The lament reveals that the people are in a desperate situation, unable to help themselves, and thus they turn to God.
- The people pray, trusting that they are still God's special people. They admit that they have been unfaithful and sinful and have lost control of their lives. They are blown around in the wind like dead leaves.
- Nonetheless, Isaiah, the prophet, closes, imaging God as a potter and the people as the clay. This closing image means the people are malleable as clay, still capable of being formed by God into God's image and likeness.

For Reflection: How has God formed you into God's image and likeness?

Responsorial Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

- The psalm images God as an attentive shepherd, imperial ruler, military captain, and vines cultivator. Like a shepherd, God cares for and protects the flock who are his people. As likened to an imperial leader and military captain, God both leads the people and protects them. God, imaged as a vinedresser, reveals the demanding and tedious work it takes to bring a vine to maturity, and by extension, God is willing to do that with us.

For Reflection: How do you react to the Psalmist's images for God?

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

- This reading's theme is that God has enriched us in every way, and we do not lack any spiritual gifts.

For Reflection: Reflect on some examples of how God has enriched your own life and the lives of others.

Reflections on the Gospel Reading (Mark 13:33-37)

In the Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent, the command "watch" is repeated three times. As a rule of thumb, anytime anything is repeated three times in Sacred Scripture, it is important and crucial and must be taken seriously. The command "watch" surrounds a parable that emphasizes the need to be ready when the Lord returns. The word translated into English as "time" in Greek is *kairos*, and it refers to a special time above all other times, rather than chronological or sequential time (Greek *Chronos*). *Kairos* can be understood as an uncommon time. Uncommon events occur within it. It is the un-chronicled time when God works. Since there was no way of knowing when the Lord will return, Christians are admonished to "watch!" The short parable brings this point home. Believers, who are watching for God, are like the

servants in the parable who remain behind when the owner of the house leaves to travel abroad. The servants are not to wait idly for the owner's return, nor are Christians to wait idly until the Lord returns. They are to perform their regular duties and be watchful.

Interestingly, the four periods of time listed in the parable---evening, midnight, cockcrow, and dawn---are the four-night watches of the Roman military. Like soldiers, Christians are urged to stand the "watch" and not be caught asleep. Waiting can sap our energies and stifle our enthusiasm. Nonetheless, the Gospel suggests that we should wait with patient expectation for the coming of the Lord. The day of the Lord is not merely something that will happen at the end of time. It happens every day in the faith lives we live.

Waiting: An everyday aspect of Human Life

Whether it be in traffic, or the wait in the checkout line at the supermarket or on the telephone, we wait. Waiting is simply part of life. Cooks wait for the water to boil, for the dough to rise, for onions and meat to brown, for casseroles to bake and for kitchen timers to sound. Waiting is part of cooking. Students wait for exam results and report cards and decisions that determine if they received a role in a play or been selected for an athletic team or admittance into college. Waiting is part of being a student. Pregnant women wait for nine months to give birth to a child. Waiting is part of being a mother. People of faith wait to encounter God's activity in their lives. Often such patient waiting results in God surprising the person waiting with new grace and blessing. Advent is a season for believers to watch for the God of surprises patiently. God is always simultaneously present and elusive but waiting for God is worth it.

Whose Calendar are we Following?

Advent also challenges us to be aware and alert as to how calendars influence our lives. People carry laptops, tablets, and cell phones with calendars and often post calendars on the front of their refrigerators. For some, the calendar runs their lives. We mark our time with the calendar year, fiscal year, and academic year. The church has its calendar, the liturgical year. In the church calendar, New Year's Day is the first Sunday of Advent. It begins roughly eleven months into the annual calendar year, five months into the fiscal year, and twelve weeks into the academic year. We might be tempted to ask: "Can't the church get itself in sync with the rest of the calendars?"

A Different Way of Telling and Marking Time

Faith and religion's practice are always out of sync with how the world tells and counts time. For what matters most to people of faith differs markedly from the rest of the world's way of determining time. Unquestionably, we have good, scientific reasons to join with the rest of humanity when marking the earth's movements around the sun. Yet we have even better spiritual reasons to celebrate time by the actions of God's Son, Jesus. In so doing, we are saying that the timeframe of our lives is more than the world of money (the fiscal Calendar), larger than the turn of semesters (the academic Calendar), more even than the movements of the solar system (the annual Calendar). We are saying that we live, move, and have our meaning from Jesus, whose life story reveals the real purpose of God's creation. Living our life cycle, the way Jesus lives his

is following a profoundly countercultural calendar, and it begins in Advent. Following such a calendar means that neither consumerism's hype nor winter's darkness nor an infectious death bearing pandemic will block the light of God.

For Reflection

- ▶ God is reshaping us like a potter reshapes clay. How have you been shaped and reshaped by the hands of God?
- ▶ Have you ever had to wait a long time for something important to happen in your life? What or who helped you wait. What role did the practice of your faith and prayer play while you were waiting?

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