

Advent 1B
November 30, 2008
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Mark 13:24-37

Let us pray.

O God, the days become shorter, the nights stretch longer, and we wait for you in the cold. Your first followers thought you were coming soon, any day now. And we still wait, 2000 years later. Maybe waiting is the posture you want us in – working, watching, and diligently doing what you call us to. Every now and then have us look heavenward, and wonder. As we repent in Advent, this little Lent, may our penance be crowned with your return. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

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Okay, time for a show of hands. True confession time. How many of you braved the stores on Black Friday?

You know, I only recently learned what that term – “Black Friday” – really means. “Black Friday” is supposed to mark the approximate time each year that retailers begin to turn a profit, or as those in finance would say, get into the black. But I always thought that the term “Black Friday” was retailer inside language, some sort of code phrase for, “Oh my gosh, what a horrible day to have to work in a store!”

Those of you who braved the stores on Black Friday, I bet you have some stories to tell. I always like to go to the mall on the afternoon of Black Friday to survey the carnage. You can witness some of the worst human behavior possible, short of out-and-out violence, at the mall on Black Friday afternoon. Makes for good sermon fodder.

And of course, all you have to do is turn on the television to see that the American Black Friday has become a deadly event nearly every year for several years. The person killed in this year's shark feeding-frenzy of shopping was a Wal-Mart employee on Long Island who was trampled to death by shoppers apparently intent on getting their bargains, no matter the cost. Reports are that when management attempted to clear the store, announcing over the intercom that they needed people to leave because someone had been killed, shoppers complained bitterly and refused to go.

So what does all this have to do with today's Gospel lesson, you might wonder? It is this basest of human behavior that helps me understand what Jesus is talking about in part of today's reading. I've always found this reading to be particularly troubling. For starters, in verse 30 Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." If we read this verse at face value, there is no possible way we can believe it. After all, Jesus

spoke these words nearly 2,000 years ago. Of course we know that the generation he was speaking to has passed away, along with countless generations since.

But I don't think this is what Jesus meant. To find his meaning we need to dig a little deeper. This word that he uses – “generation” – is used only four other places in the Gospel of Mark. In each of these places, Jesus speaks this word as a pejorative – he's disparaging the people he's talking about. When he talks about “this generation” what he really means is this unbelieving, adulterous and sinful people. He's not talking about a group of people that are only living in one particular time. Jesus is talking about the sorts of people that we will always have with us “until that day when Jesus brings in the new heaven and new earth. No matter how hard we try to convert all the peoples of the world – and that is part of our calling while waiting – there will always be those people who will not believe – people whose lives bring pain and destruction to others.”¹ Observing the behavior of many people on Black Friday testifies to the sad truth of this reality.

The next troubling part of this reading has to do with the very same question some of the disciples ask back at the beginning of this chapter in Mark. Peter, James, John and Andrew ask, “When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” It is these questions of when and how that have troubled people ever since the time of Jesus.

People have looked at these verses and other similar texts in the Bible and attempted to treat them as if they were some sort of crystal ball at the local palm reader's shop, gazing into them for indications of the end times. I'm sure we can all remember news stories of some apocalyptic doomsday cult claiming that the end was imminent. Most recently, last November a cult of former Russian Orthodox Christians buried themselves in a cave in Russia because they believed Jesus' return was coming any day.

But again, this is not Jesus' meaning. His words were not intended to be read like tea leaves in a fortune teller's shop. He's very clear in this regard. He says, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." Not even Jesus knew when. He said, "About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

So Jesus' call to us is to remain faithful until that day when he does come again. Live your lives for the present, not for some unknown future. Live your lives in the here-and-now as faithful disciples, loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbors as yourselves.

And if that day of Jesus' return does come during our lifetimes, we have nothing to fear. Even if we should see signs in the heavens such as those Jesus

describes, there is nothing for the faithful to fear, for we have been faithful and God will be faithful to us.

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If you were to get some of those frenzied Black Friday shoppers to stop long enough to answer a simple question, I'm sure their answer would amaze and sadden you. If you could ask them, "What are you looking for?" I'm sure many would reply, "I'm looking for the perfect gift."

After all, this has become a sort of advertising mantra in the days approaching Christmas. I want you all to do a little exercise. In the next three and a half weeks, every time you watch television – listen closely to the ads. See if you can count how many times they say, "Still searching for the perfect gift?" I think you'll be stunned how many times you'll hear that phrase.

A few years ago I was a bit taken aback by the sorts of gifts I began receiving from my sister-in-law. Now don't get me wrong: I love my sister-in-law a lot. But her gifting behavior suddenly started to seem a bit odd to me. It became apparent that she'd started doing her Christmas shopping in the grocery store. One Christmas I received a can of soup and a box of tissues. Now it was obvious that she had selected these things specifically with me in mind. She knows I like teddy bears. So

the soup had teddy bear-shaped pasta, and the tissue box featured a festive teddy design.

But over the years her shopping has moved away from those teddy bear-themed items. One year I received a box of Lipton dried soup. Another year it was a can of black-eyed peas, our family's traditional New Year's food. Last year I received a box of tea. Yes, she's still Christmas shopping in the grocery store. But her shopping is making an increasing amount of sense to me. She had apparently asked herself the question, "What do you get for the person who has everything?" and come up with these items that she knew I would use. In her way, she's found the perfect gift.

Those of us who believe don't need to keep searching for the perfect gift. We've already received it. We have everything we ultimately need. We have the gift of Jesus Christ. We need not fear when we think we see signs of the end times. We need not fear when our own time comes. We have the assurance of God's love.

So next time you hear the phrase, "Still looking for the perfect gift?" you can respond with confidence, "Nope! I've already got it!"

Amen.

<1,410 words>

¹ Brian Stoffregen, *1 Advent B: Mark 13:24-37 – exegetical notes*.