

Sermon by the Rector

I Advent B; November 30, 2008

[Isaiah 64:1-9](#)

[Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18](#)

[Mark 13:24-37](#)

Advent is an apocalyptic season. "Watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour": something big could happen at any moment, and it's best to be ready.

Human beings have apocalyptic proclivities - we Americans especially. We look for God to rend the heavens and come down, to set things right, to act and speak in a definitive, once-for-all way.

Looking back at our history, we see many such moments. The War of Independence, the Civil War, World War II and the struggle to extinguish Fascism, the Civil Rights movement and its once-for-all consigning of statutory segregation to the dustbin of history: apocalyptic, definitive, rend-the-heavens-and-come-down moments.

On second look, though, even these moments lose some of their definitive character. Each of them produced unintended consequences, bore a mixed harvest of good fruit and bad, springing from a mixture of noble and ignoble motives.

The same dynamic obtains in the more personal, even intimate aspects of our lives. We seek, for instance, the definitive "Relationship-with-a-capital-R", and sometimes even believe we've found it. With time, though, it becomes clear that even the central relationships of our lives resemble other human relationships in almost every respect, with the same ups and downs, deep sympathies and abiding misunderstandings. Same goes for the "Job-with-a-capital-J", the "dream job" many now seem to think might be found in the ranks of the incoming Obama administration. Turns out even the best jobs are jobs like any other job, with the same mix of challenge and tedium, opportunity and irritation.

So what do we do when reality punctures our apocalyptic expectations?

Sometimes, we scale back our expectations. We teach ourselves not to look for a definitive action, or listen for a definitive work, in any circumstance. Only disappointment awaits those who don't learn to limit their hopes in this way.

But we can get too good at "scaling back", and miss important benchmarks in our lives. Here's how it sometimes happens in my own case:

As a pastor, I get to know people fairly well, often sharing the crises and blessings of their lives in a special and intimate way. Over time, I get a pretty clear idea of who people are, how they think and act. And then, from time to time, as I engage with a person in the church I serve, I hear myself saying inwardly, "That's just so-and-so acting like so-and-so, person X behaving

like person X." I don't stop listening, but I grow pretty confident of my assessment of them in that moment.

This works well, until it doesn't. And it doesn't work in those moments when "person X" is, suddenly, grappling with an issue in a more honest way, or feeling something more deeply. The branch has grown tender and put forth buds. God has rent the heavens and come down. And I wasn't really watching, or listening.

Another example: a few months ago I read an article in the New Yorker about Barack Obama's life as a Chicago politician. The article disclosed that he sometimes – how shocking! – behaved like a politician, occasionally pandering, discarding a supporter or two coldly when they got in his way. I was relieved to hear the article, because I feel more secure when I limit my expectations, and the author's analysis gave me good reason to do so. Obama's won't be "The Presidency with a capital P"; it'll be, in most respects, a presidency like any other. I'll hope a few worthwhile things can be accomplished, and hope no lasting harm is done.

This approach works well, until it doesn't. And it doesn't work in those moments when a whole nation might find itself facing an issue like race with more integrity than it did before, or feeling the harm done by racism, and the hope proffered by its withering, more deeply than before. I need to be careful. Maybe, as has happened before, the branch will grow tender and put forth new buds. God might, in some way, rend the heavens and come down, to point us definitively in a new direction. I wouldn't want to be caught not watching, or not listening.

Apocalyptic expectations usually meet with disappointment. We learn to control our yearning for a definitive word or action. The branch is usually dry and bud-less, the heavens opaque. But not always. Watch, for you know neither the day, nor the hour.