

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

First Sunday in Advent, Cycle B – November 27, 2011

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Reflects on **Isaiah 63: 16-17, 64: 1-8;**  
**1 Cor. 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 33-37**

**T**he candle on our Advent wreath reminds us that we have entered into a time of waiting and watching. But that waiting can take on various tones. A few weeks ago, we heard the parable of the ten bridal attendants—five wise and five foolish ones. Surely that waiting was supposed to be festive, and the message was “don't miss out on the celebration!”

The tone of the waiting in today's readings is much darker, because the context is darker. In the gospel Jesus is on the Mount of Olives with four of his disciples—Peter, James, John, and Andrew—and they are looking across the Kidron Valley to the splendid temple of Jerusalem rising above the city's walls. Jesus says that it will all be gone before long, and the disciples, surprised at this prediction, want to know when this will happen. Jesus answers with a series of warnings that has become known as the “Little Apocalypse,” chapter 13 of Mark's gospel.

It is the last few days of Jesus' earthly life. Two days earlier he had arrived in Jerusalem, riding on a donkey and acclaimed by adoring crowds. But he has now had some run-ins with various opponents, and he knows where this is leading. The disciples are still in denial, as we would say, and Jesus warns them that their world is about to fall apart. His warnings include: the rising up of false prophets and messiahs; persecution of his followers, who will be beaten in synagogues and hauled before tribunals; war and earthquakes and famine, along with cosmic portents—the sun and moon will go dark, and stars will fall from the sky. This is how the Jewish literary imagination expressed the conviction that disaster would bring about a powerful manifestation of God's presence. These warnings are the backdrop for today's parable.

How do people survive, mentally, emotionally, and morally, when hard times come? We are fortunate to live here and now, rather than, say, in East Africa, where there is famine, or civil war with an Islamic insurgency (in Somalia), or a false prophet leading a so-called Lord's Resistance Army (originally from Uganda) that has committed countless atrocities. Apocalyptic words that sound alarmist and exaggerated to us seem all too real there.

Our challenges are not so dramatic, but we must still be ready to face them. This is the what Jesus is talking about in his parable about the household whose owner is away.

The household is a favorite metaphor in Jesus' preaching, because it represents the community, the ties that bind us together. We make a mistake if we hear this parable as applying to unconnected individuals. We are all in this together. It is with each other, as a community, that we find salvation.

How would this parable have fallen on the ears of the original listeners—Peter, James, John, and Andrew? Their immediate “household” was a small band of disciples, the men and women who accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem. As we know, their leader, the “owner” of the house, is about to leave them—he is going where they cannot follow—at least not yet—on a journey through death and beyond. How will they be able to survive it? By keeping watch with each other; attending to their tasks within the community, keeping the household going, keeping their eyes and hearts open.

And you know what? Whatever their failures, they didn't entirely flub it: The men—perhaps the most exposed to danger—scattered when Jesus was arrested; Peter even followed Jesus part way, before he panicked and denied him.

But some of the women accompanied Jesus to the cross, mourned his death, and saw where he was laid, so that they could attend to the necessary funeral rites. They were awake early on Easter morning, went to the tomb and came back with the astonishing news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They were like the watchers at the gate, the first ones of the household to realize that the owner of the house was returning.

This parable must have been very meaningful to Mark's community, given the situation they lived in. Christians had been expelled from synagogues, and their leaders had been hauled before tribunals. Two of the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking, James and Peter, have now been put to death: James in Jerusalem, and Peter in Rome. But Mark's community is still intact, still keeping watch, still looking out for each other, and waiting for what Paul calls "the day of our Savior Jesus Christ."

Paul's community in Corinth does not seem to be in imminent danger of persecution, so the waiting there is much less troubled: "You lack no spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Savior Jesus Christ," Paul says. "God will strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Savior Jesus Christ." "You can do it," Paul seems to be saying to the church at Corinth—though a large part of his letter will be about how much they need to improve!

Here in Santa Barbara, we hear this parable from a different place. Perhaps it's more like Isaiah's situation in today's first reading. Our waiting is neither as urgent as Mark's nor as confident as Paul's. Sometimes the waiting seems to go on and on, and we don't see that anything is happening. What are we waiting for?

Today's passage is from the final part of the book of Isaiah, composed several decades after the Jews' return from Babylon to Israel. The optimistic hope of the middle chapters of the book—the soaring words about valleys being

raised up and mountains laid low—has now given way to sober reality. It has been a long, hard slog to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple; perhaps even harder is the task of re-forming a community. Those who have returned from exile have to find a way to live with the people who did not leave—probably peasants and menial workers who were not important enough to deport. There have been so many disappointments, disagreements, recriminations, and failures.

Isaiah expresses so many mixed feelings in this passage. Primary among them is the wish that God would let him/herself be known: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!" Also in the mix are feelings of regret: "Oh, that you would find us doing right." And there is as well as a note of hopeful appeal to God's tenderness: "You are our Father"; "you are the potter; we are the work of your hands".

Did Isaiah ever get an answer? Maybe only in the sense that the Jews did find a way to survive as a community, even to the present day. But his anguished cry raises the question of what we think we are waiting for, what we expect to happen—and what we have eyes to see. There is a moment in Luke's gospel when Jesus laments that "Jerusalem did not know the time of her visitation." Maybe we should not be surprised. Could Isaiah ever have imagined that God would "rend the heavens and come down" in the form of a baby born to an obscure couple in a small town? Would he have recognized a God who "emptied himself . . . and took the form of a slave . . . obedient unto death, even death on a cross?"

Our waiting has to be with minds alert, hearts awake, eyes open—open to things unexpected, perhaps to things that seem too humble and ordinary to reveal God. We do this together, as a household of faith, sharing the tasks of life, with many eyes keeping watch for the signs of God's coming among us.