

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

Psalm 80

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:33-37

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It will probably be no surprise for at least some of you to learn that one of my pet peeves is people not paying attention. I get really irritated when I am in a conversation with someone, and I can tell from the other person's responses or body language that he or she is not listening. But what irritates me even more is when I become aware of the fact that I am the one not paying attention to the other person; or, in other circumstances, when I miss a turn, or even run a stop sign, because my mind was somewhere other than on my driving; or when I find myself several pages into a book and realize that I have no clue about what I just read; or when I say, "Thanks be to God," at the end of a Scriptural reading at Mass and cannot remember anything about the reading, not even the book from which it was taken. Now, for the record, I do remember today's readings. But then, I knew what was coming. Paying attention is not hard, but it does take some effort. That effort usually involves casting aside distractions and focusing on the task, or the issue, at hand.

The Advent season that we are entering on this first Sunday of the new liturgical year gives us plenty of opportunities to practice our paying attention skills. During the season of Advent, Holy Scripture and the Church invite us first to look forward in hope for Christ to come again, to come in glory and majesty at the end of time, to complete the mission, and to conquer all evil in our world. But we are also invited during Advent to look back with faith, remembering the incarnation of Jesus on the occasion of his birth in Bethlehem. The readings for the first three Sundays of advent point us forward to the second coming of Christ. In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah calls on God to

come to the aid of a suffering people. In the second reading, Saint Paul wrote to the people of Corinth that the spiritual gifts of God have prepared them, as they have prepared us, for the return of Christ. And in the Gospel from Mark, Jesus tells his disciples to, "Be watchful!" and, "Be alert!" for the coming of the Lord. Then, the readings for the fourth Sunday of Advent, which falls on Christmas Eve this year, point us back to the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus as we prepare to celebrate his birth at Christmas.

During the season of Advent, while we are looking forward to the second coming of Christ and looking back at the historical birth of Jesus, we continue to live in the present. And we remember that Christ remains always with us in the present. We must pay attention to that presence – to see Christ in the Eucharist as well as in all people and in all situations that we encounter; to follow God's call to fellowship with Christ and with others in all that we do; and to rejoice in the presence of Christ all the days of our lives. But that is where the distractions of our lives get in the way. We hear a lot about the distractions of the season – over-the-top commercial marketing of the secular side of Christmas; excessive eating, drinking, and celebrating throughout the holiday season; and silly, prejudicial arguments about appropriate holiday greetings. Added to these seasonal distractions, we encounter many other distractions throughout the year – obsessions with money, careers, politics, and social status; engaging in destructive gossip; fixations with technological conveniences like the internet and our phones; and the curse of three great evils of our time – fear, greed, and hate. Our challenge this Advent season, and always, is to overcome all these distractions, reject evil in all forms, and embrace the presence of Christ in our lives.

Our Lord has come already, and we long for him to come again. The Gospel's call to, "Be watchful!" and "Be alert!" is not only inviting us to prepare for that second coming at the end of

time. But it is also calling us to pay attention to the presence of Christ in our lives today. So, let us use this season of Advent, these next three weeks before Christmas, to set aside distractions, to reject evil, and to put our faith and hope in Christ, who is with us always.