

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Make a simple Advent wreath for the center of your group—three purple candles, one pink, a few evergreens.

LEADER: Advent is the threshold of a new Church year.

ALL: Let us open the door to God's comings in our lives.

LEADER: We are waiting for the world to turn.

ALL: The days are short, the nights long, the chaos scary.

LEADER: We will celebrate the birth of the Christ child.

ALL: Jesus is the reason for the season, not the sales.

LEADER: Let us be among those of good will who seek peace on Earth.

ALL: Let us make room in our lives for every neighbor.



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As chapter 13 of Mark's gospel begins, Jesus' disciples admire the beauty of the temple but Jesus prophesies that it will not stand. The disciples want to know more about the future. Jesus tells them and us that we live in a birthing process. Wars, earthquakes, famines, trials, betrayals are birth pangs. The God who creates is the God in whose hands all will come together. We participate in this birthing process.

If we place the history of the world in the framework of a single day, Jesus is born shortly before midnight. The cosmos has evolved through a 13.7-billion-year birthing process.

In the big bang all the energy that exists flared forth in a vast unfurling, a trillion-degree blast so powerful the universe is still expanding. In this cosmic birthing process the original fireball expands and cools, hydrogen and helium bond, gravity pulls matter together slightly faster than the

universe expands, constellating into trillions of separate clouds of hydrogen and helium—the galaxies. The clouds fracture into self-implosion nuclear furnaces—the primal stars.

After about 10 billion years our solar system forms and after another billion years bacteria evolve. Life begins.

All that exists shares this violent birthing process, these transformations that create the diversity, the communion, and the consciousness we know. We live in a vast cosmic pregnancy.

On this 1st Sunday of Advent the new Church year begins and the gospel invites us to wait intentionally at the threshold of the future. Jesus' words promise that he, like the estate owner in Sunday's gospel, will return. Our faith calls us to embody hope and practice love in our world.

● How do you participate in birthing peace on earth?

GOSPEL

Watch! Stay awake!

NARRATOR: Jesus said to his disciples.

JESUS 1: Watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come.

JESUS 2: It will be like a householder going on a journey who leaves home, puts his slaves in charge, each with tasks, and orders the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

JESUS 1: Stay awake, for you do not know when the owner of the

house will come—in the evening or at midnight, at cockcrow or dawn. So, do not let him come suddenly and find you asleep.

JESUS 2: What I say to you, I say to all: Stay awake!

Mark 13:33-37



How do we wake from slumber to conscious faith?

As Advent and the new Church year begin, a new cycle of scripture readings begins, too. This year Cycle B will bring us the mystery of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, from Mark's gospel, the first to be written. Next Sunday we will focus on the gospel's first verses. This Sunday we skip to a parable near the end.

Chapter 13 is apocalyptic in literary form, a kind of ancient writing that anticipates when good will triumph over present evil and present suffering will end. Jesus' disciples seek a revelation about when the end things will happen. The narrative looks beyond Jesus' passion toward the struggles of the Christian community after his resurrection.

As chapter 13 begins, Jesus is coming out of the temple. One

of his disciples remarks about how large the foundation stones are. Jesus responds, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask when Jesus' words will come true, when the temple will be destroyed. Part of Jesus' answer is our gospel passage this Sunday—no one knows when the end will be, not the day, not the hour.

Instead of a date for the end of all things, Jesus gives us a one-verse parable about a man who goes on a journey, leaves his slaves in charge, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Stay awake at the door. This is the message to take with us for the new Church year—watch. Stay awake at the door.

● What practices help you lead an awake, conscious, intentional spiritual life?

● What leads you to drift and snooze?

Mark's gospel has an interest in how faith develops. The gospels we hear this year will repeatedly tell stories in which Jesus' disciples or others fear for their lives. In calming the sea, casting out an unclean spirit, or healing the sick, Jesus brings people beyond fear to awe and amazement. Who is this that the wind and sea obey him, they exclaim? Who is this that speaks with such authority? Awe and amazement create thresholds where faith can begin. In Jesus' interactions with others, doors open and invite faith.

Sunday's gospel warns that no one knows when the owner of the house will return. The owner may come in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. These times of day anticipate threshold moments in the journey Jesus' disciples make with him during his passion. In the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow Jesus' disciples fail to watch.

Literally Peter, James, and John fall asleep when they accompany Jesus to the garden after their Passover meal together. Jesus prays and agonizes about the cup he must drink. They sleep. He wakes them up twice



and tells Peter specifically to keep awake, but the disciples doze off, the spirit willing, the flesh weak.

At midnight in the deep of night the disciple Judas, who betrays Jesus, leads a crowd to arrest his Teacher. All of Jesus' disciples except

Peter run away. They fear for their lives and flee. No doorway to faith opens in this encounter.

At cockcrow, a doorway to faith opens for Peter, who has followed Jesus to the high priest's house. A servant girl suggests Peter accompanies the Nazarene; Peter denies even knowing Jesus. A cock crowing awakens Peter, who realizes he has denied his friend. Peter breaks down and weeps.

Mark pictures in these three times of day three thresholds. These are ordinary moments of encounter with others. In the evening the three disciples sleep through the opportunity to be present and pray with a friend. At midnight the disciples' survival instincts kick in; they revert to self-serving action and



split. At cockcrow Peter realizes he has boastfully overstated his loyalty. His tears and regret create a new, more realistic threshold for his faith in Jesus.

Dawn is the fourth time of day, the hour when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother

of James and Joses, and Salome find Jesus' tomb empty. The empty tomb is the ultimate threshold that invites faith that God has raised Jesus to new life.

● With what time of day in the parable do you identify?

There are doorways all the time where we encounter one another and have opportunity to be present. Our houses and offices have doors. These are thresholds where we meet and can be awake to one another.

In dark midnight moments our fears can take us over as they did Jesus' disciples. The urge is strong to avoid things that are hard. But difficulties and fears also present thresholds that call us to consider others' points of view, to seek to understand

what we fear, to talk with friends about what terrifies us.

Cockcrow is a familiar hour. Who has not heard the cock crow

and recognized I have done something I profoundly regret, something I never thought I was even capable of doing? Our regrets and tears help make us real.

At the heart of our faith is the dawn moment, the hour of resurrection. The word *resurrection* means *waking*. In our faith that God raised up Jesus to new life is a spirituality that believes new life can come where relationships are dead or where leaders are asleep to people's needs.

Pope Francis insists resurrection is an irresistible force and not a thing of the past. "Often it seems God does not exist; all around us we see persistent injustice, evil, indifference, and cruelty. But it is also true that in the midst of darkness something new always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit. On razed land life breaks through, stubbornly yet invincibly" (*Joy of the Gospel* #276).

Evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn mark stages in a process of maturing faith. This birthing process moves from slumber to denial, to regret and waking. Mark's gospel awakens us to the thresholds in every day and in every meeting with another person.

● What is a threshold you have crossed to faith?

● At what doorways are you watching for God's coming?

● What awakens your consciousness to Advent in the midst of holiday bustle?

DO SOMETHING

Explore early in Advent ways to live the works of mercy as a family. Join in parish activities, or start customs of your own. Involve your children and/or grandchildren in helping families in need, visiting shut-ins, singing for seniors. Children will remember picking out gifts for a child their age or supplying another family with food or helping serve a meal at a shelter.

God will lead us home.

The Church takes its Advent first readings from Isaiah, a prophetic book in which voices speak from three different periods in Israel's history. First Isaiah (chapters 1-39) served in the temple and preached peace in the late 700s B.C. Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) comforts the Israelites in exile and urges them to return home when the Persians defeat the Babylonians, 540 B.C. In chapters 56-66 a Third Isaiah speaks, now to those who have returned and work to rebuild their temple, city, and religious identity.

Third Isaiah speaks this Sunday, pleading with God "to tear open the heavens and come down" (63.19). The people feel desolate—God has delivered them to their guilt and hidden from them. They confess their sins. Their good works are like menstrual rags! The people have withered like leaves.

Third Isaiah sees no way to bridge the distance between God and the people except by God's coming. God must remove the barriers and appear so that "the nations might tremble at your presence."

The prophet appeals to God as father and trusts this relationship of intimate belonging and care.

Tear open the heavens, come.

You, O God, are our father, our redeemer is your name from of old.

Why do you let us wander, O God, from your ways and harden our hearts

**so that we fear you not?
Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.
We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.**

**Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake before you.
You did awesome deeds that we did not expect.
No ear has heard, no eye seen any God but you who works for those who wait.
You meet those who do right, who remember you in your ways.**

**You were angry; we sinned.
We have become like one unclean.
Our good deeds are like filthy rags;
We have all withered like leaves;
our iniquities blow us away like the wind.**

**No one calls on your name or clings to you.
You have hidden your face from us and delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, Holy One, you are our father.
We are the clay; you, the potter.
We are all the work of your hands.**

Isaiah 63.16-17,19; 64.2-7

- What feelings in this reading do you share?
- When have you called on God with this intensity?
- What appeals to you about the image of God as father and potter?

PRAY

LEADER: God is faithful and calls us into community with Jesus in the Spirit.

ALL: Potter of the universe, Revealer of God's face, Spirit in our community, we call on your name.

Call out names and titles of God that are significant to you.

LEADER: Loving God, our hands co-create with yours until the end.

ALL: We call on your name.

LEADER: Let us see your kindness.

ALL: Wake us to your presence in our relationships.

Exchange a sign of peace.

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GIFT ALERT

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