

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the four Sundays when we prepare for the celebration of Christmas. And I hate to burst some bubbles but Black Friday is not the first day of Christmas. The first day of Christmas is December 25th. This is Advent. The time of preparation.

The Scriptures which are assigned to the first Sunday of Advent in the lectionary are always apocalyptic Scriptures. Now what are apocalyptic Scriptures? Apocalyptic Scriptures are Scriptures which are focused on the end times.

Recently Harold Camping was the latest in a long line of self-proclaimed prophets to predict the end of the world. He did all of these calculations after reading the Bible literally and predicted that the end of the world would occur in May of this past year. Like every self-proclaimed prophet before him, he was wrong about the end of the world. Every time a new end times prophet emerges I am always reminded of the words of Jesus who said he did not know when the end would occur. If Jesus doesn't know I trust that no one else knows.

But I want to take a different approach to this particular Scripture today. Rather than looking for signs of the end times, I invite us to read this Scripture as pointing to events that are happening today. Events which give witness to the ways that God is breaking into the world today.

Today we will be reading from the gospel of Mark. Mark is the shortest of the four gospels. Mark is the shortest because Mark does not include many of the stories that are found in the other gospels. We will not be reading from Mark on Christmas Eve because Mark has nothing about the birth of Jesus in his written account. In fact, most scholars believe that Mark is the earliest gospel and that Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark when they wrote their gospel accounts.

Read Mark 13:28-36 (These are the words of Jesus)

What does it mean to keep awake to see God? Let me share a story that author Kerry Patterson tells about what happened to him when he was 8 years old.

This story begins in the spring of 1954 and two important events were happening over the same weekend—Mother's Day and the appearance of a traveling carnival. Both required money. Lots of money. Fortunately, after months of squirreling away most of his weekly 50-cent allowance, Patterson was able to set aside six whole dollars—two dollars to buy his mom a pair of Mother's Day earrings she had pointed out at a local jewelry store, two dollars for an unlimited ride pass at the carnival, and two dollars for food and bus fare.

When the appointed day finally arrived, Patterson leaped off the bus and set straight off to buy his Mom some earrings. Unfortunately, as he approached the jewelry store he also drew closer to the carnival and its joyous and tempting sounds. Patterson decided to put off buying the Mother's Day earrings and go straight for the home of the Loopty-Loop.

But instead of going directly to the ticket booth and buying an unlimited ride pass, Patterson wandered into the midway where a hoard of carnies tried to convince him to win dolls, pinwheels, and the like. At first, Patterson resisted the invitation to play the games. They weren't in his budget and besides, who wanted any of that cheap junk?

And then Patterson came across a booth that awarded winners a small cage containing a parakeet. He had never seen such magnificent birds. They weren't just green and blue; they were *fluorescent* green and blue. And according to the nice carnie with the missing front teeth who worked the booth, you could teach the exotic creatures to talk. Plus the fellow had a "MOM" tattoo on his right bicep. It was fate. It was a sign.

Hesitantly, Patterson loosened his grip on his six dollars as he sized up the challenge in front of him. All he had to do to win the most extraordinary prize ever offered by a man with a pack of Lucky Strikes trapped under his right T-shirt sleeve was throw a dime and land it on a plate—a huge plate no less. And there were dozens of plates. So Patterson took a deep breath and cashed in one of his dollars for ten dimes.

The first dime hit right on a plate but then it bounced off. But then it almost landed on another plate. This was going to be a breeze, he thought to himself. Of course, it wasn't one bit easy. After bouncing six dimes and winning nothing, he started having second thoughts. But then the fellow with the whispering tattoo told him not to worry. "You're bound to win soon!" he promised. "Honest."

And so went the two dollars he had set aside for food and return bus fare. But all wasn't lost, Patterson reasoned. If he won a bird soon, he would no longer need the two dollars he'd set aside for the earrings and he'd be back on budget. The next twenty dimes bounced pretty much like the first twenty. They would hit one plate, glance off another—and almost win him a bird. Almost.

As he clutched his last two dollars, Patterson was tempted to walk straight to the jewelry store before it was too late, but then as he turned to exit from over his shoulder he heard one of the parakeets chirp, "Pretty bird!"

The three-mile walk home was a dismal one for Patterson. He hadn't eaten anything, He didn't get to ride anything, He had no money, no earrings, no bird, and worst of all, boy, was he going to get a lecture!

As he trudged down the dirt road that led home, his next-door neighbor, George Lockhart, drove up in his milk truck. George arose every day at the crack of dawn and delivered milk to the front doors of various families around town. He was now on his way home.

Patterson told Mr. Lockhart about losing his entire six dollars that day. George Lockhart nodded knowingly but didn't say a word. Eventually, when they arrived at his house, Mr. Lockhart turned to Patterson and said, "I've done you a good turn by giving you a ride home, would you do something for me? I've just had a new load of wood delivered and I need some of it chopped into kindling." Then he handed Patterson an ax.

After a couple of hours of fevered chopping, Mr. Lockhart reappeared, gave the stack of kindling a nod of approval, and said it was getting dark so Patterson should go home. But then Mr. Lockhart said that it was only fair that he pay Patterson for all of his hard work that day. He handed him six one-dollar bills.

When most people read this Scripture about looking for the time when Christ returns, they think this means the end of the world with magical events. Many folks go out and spend their money on movies and books by authors who could be compared to carnies enticing you with their slick pronouncement that they have the end times all figured out.

But I wonder if keeping a watch for the return of Christ means looking for opportunities to allow Christ to use us to be Christ to others and keeping watch for how others are Christ to us. Keep watch. There may be an 8 year old boy who needs to learn someone about the love of Christ. And you may be the one called on to share it by your words and/or actions.

Keep watch.

You may be the one who needs to learn something about the love of Christ from someone else.

Keep watch.

No one knows when Christ may appear around you or through you. AMEN.

-Patterson, Kerry, "Crucial Skills" email newsletter, Vol. 9, Issue 46

-Mark 13: 28-37

-Given: Nov. 27, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)