

The First Sunday of Advent
Pastor John H. Brock

November 30, 2008
Trinity Lutheran Church

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;
1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Grace to you and peace, from the One who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

So, what's the death count so far? At least three that I am aware of – two men shot and killed each other at a Toys-R-Us in Palm Desert, California, and a Wal-Mart worker in Long Island who was trampled to death. That's the latest body count in this "holiday" weekend – two men who shoot each other because the women they are with began a screaming match in a crowded toy store; and a recently hired temporary worker is trampled to death by shoppers, who then express "remorse" . . . that the store has to be closed while the police investigate the death.

Now personally, while I think that these events are tragic, they do indeed pale in comparison to what has happened in Mumbai, India this past week. But there are those who may think that since the majority of those who were killed were Indian nationals, the American new services only need to give passing reference to this tragedy; after all, there were only six Americans who were killed, and twelve foreigners. Do we honestly need to know anything about those other 177 folks? They were native Indians, at least one of the gunmen was Pakistani, so it was an internal affair. (And for those of you who don't know me well enough, that was sarcasm.) Of course I think we ought to be very concerned about those 195 massacre victims in Mumbai. But even when 195 people were killed, because it happened in a foreign nation that is 17 time zones away and over an American holy day, it garnered our attention for the requisite 15 minutes and then poof!, it's gone. We've got more important stuff to do, don't we? We had to get ready for Black Friday. And we have to get ready for Cyber Monday tomorrow. We've got Christmas shopping to do, and letters to write and cards to send and turkey to clean up and parties to plan. I'm really sorry about those folks in Mumbai. And maybe I'm feeling a little unsettled about the Toys-R-Us shootout, or a little bit of remorse for the temporary security guard. But hey, I didn't know them, I can't help them, I'm too busy.

But it was the end of the world for those folks.

By the time the Gospel of Mark, which was probably the first of the gospels, was written, somewhere around 50 to 60 A.D., there had been a Jewish uprising, primarily based out of Palestine. The Roman government put a clamp to it, put on their iron gauntlets: Hard. In order to put an end to it, General Titus, the adopted son of Emperor Vespasian, laid siege to Jerusalem and razed it, and, in order to make his point, crucified thousands of Jews; it was a true massacre. The temple, the palace, the walls surrounding Jerusalem were all reduced to rubble.

If you pick up your Bible and turn to Mark Chapter 13 (oh wait, we're Lutherans – we don't do that, so let me read it to you): "As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' When Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and

Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.’”

That’s the prelude to our lesson this morning. Kind of puts things a little more in perspective, doesn’t it? I can almost imagine people in Jerusalem in the A.D. 70’s running around after Titus has destroyed the temple saying to one another, “Did you hear? Did you hear that story from Mark about that guy, that Jesus from Nazareth, how he talked about the temple being destroyed, and now the temple is destroyed? The temple is destroyed, the temple that Herod built is dust – what do you think that means? This guy Jesus, he talked about returning from the dead – do you think that’s going to happen?” Their world was coming to an end, and here’s some guy, some prophet, somebody who’s maybe even more than a prophet saying that the world is coming to an end. So be ready. Pay attention. Keep awake.

How awake are you? Maybe on Thursday you needed to stay awake to go to the midnight opening of the outlet stores to get those really good deals. Or maybe you got up really early on Friday morning to get to the 5 A.M. opening of Wal-Mart. So what did you do to get ready for that? Did you drink a lot of coffee? Take a good cold shower? Or did you do my favorite thing and down a whole lot of Mountain Dew? How did you get ready for the big shopping day?

Or, the holiday season has started – are you sending out invitations? Are you wrapping presents? Are you cleaning the house? We’re preparing, we’re getting ready for all of these things. But what are we doing to prepare for the return of Christ?

We hear in the message from Mark’s gospel this morning, first of all, at some point, that we will all suffer. Secondly, nobody knows when that suffering will come about – not even Jesus knows when that suffering will come, or when Jesus Himself will return. But more importantly, be ready, Jesus says; and Mark reminds us, keep awake. (Now normally, I would be tempted at this point to be very loud when I say “keep awake,” but in deference to our sound system, let me just stress it and say it this way) Keep awake! Get ready! Be prepared!

How? Talk to God. You can talk to God on your knees, or while you’re in bed in the morning or in the evening; you can talk to God in the car when that idiot cuts in front of you and instead of cursing at them, talk to God; you can talk to God when your teacher gives you that unexpected pop quiz, or when your boss drops a whole pile of work on your desk at 4:45 in the afternoon. Keep awake. Be ready.

Read scripture (I know, it’s a radical concept for Lutherans). Be a witness of your faith in how you live. We heard Jen Schwalm in her temple talk this morning talk about our Vision Statement, “Disciples in the Making, Making Disciples,” calling us, reminding us that we are to live out our witness, not just when we’re gathered here in the brick and mortar of this building.

Some of you may have heard of or read about or seen the video by Randy Pausch, the author of *The Last Lecture*. Randy was a professor out in Pittsburgh, who had pancreatic cancer. He became very intensely aware of the importance of using time wisely. According to a May 26 Newsweek article, he declared that “At this point, I’m an authority on what to do with limited time.” Randy had hooked three monitors to his computer in order to increase his electronic workspace. He put uncomfortable chairs in his office to keep visitors from lingering. He stood up whenever he was on a phone call as an incentive to finish the calls quickly. He was striving to prepare for the end of his life.

How are we preparing for Christ’s return?

Here was this guy, Randy, who did a great deal. Can’t I at least do something as simple as give food to the food pantry? Buy a gift card at Giant for a family that has just lost their jobs? I may have lost one sixth of my pension due to unwise division of my portfolio, but I’ve still got a roof over my head, I’ve got food to eat, I’ve got a place to take a hot shower, I’m basically healthy. But am I ready? Am I awake? How will Christ find me when he returns?

Will he find me to be that servant living out the promises of my baptism? Those promises to be a witness of God in my life? To teach my children about God’s love through my actions? Or will Christ find me arguing with somebody I don’t even know over a gift in a toy store that’s something that my kid honestly doesn’t need? If I end up the victim of a whacked out religious fanatic in a foreign country, will I be remembered simply as one of “the Americans killed” or will people say, “Let me tell you about what this person did, about how he lived his life.” That’s the message Mark has for us here, that’s the message we get from this apocalyptic passage: remember the past; prepare for the future; live in the now.

And most importantly: Keep Awake.

Amen.