

The Maze of the Mall or the Labyrinth Path?

-or-

Shopping the Apocalypse This Christmas?

An Advent Hope Sermon on Mark 13:24-38

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Trinity United, Ottawa

Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

Stay Awake! In the midst of this crisis the Christ is near!
Stay Awake! Watch in the darkness for the Light that is surely coming!
Stay Awake! And attend to the Master's work.

Three times, the writer of the Gospel of Mark exhorts first Century Christian disciples in the midst of their crisis: Maintain your focus! Trust your chosen path. Be open to encounters with angels along the way. And even though the sky is falling, get on with the work you are meant to do. The crisis will inexorably unwind - right into God's hands.

This passage is called Mark's "little apocalypse." Liberal and progressive Christians do not take this expectation of the end-of-the world literally. And though we may find the imagery of the passage powerful, we don't generally find its threatening tones helpful in the development of a healthy Christian spirituality. I can't tell you how awake and attentive and aware I've been this week, watching for the light in this dark scripture, so I might bring you a meaningful message on Hope Sunday. Finally, on Friday, illumination came from the CBC. I found a metaphorical application of this ominous scripture, that may shine a little light on our Advent paths.

The month of December is Advent, the time to walk consciously toward the holy One. Awake. Aware. Attentive. But in our society - let's face it - it's shopping season. By now I'm usually poised for my annual scurry around the maze of St Laurent Mall - where I can still get lost. But instead of the mall walk, I'm wondering if instead, I'll walk our Labyrinth downstairs a lot. I can't remember an Advent more pregnant with peoples questions about shopping. I hear people asking themselves and each other: Do we really want to shop for

seasonal extravagances when we and our loved ones already have all we need? Can I really afford to shop? Is it good for our world to shop? And should we believe the American economists who say that only shopping will save us?

Friday morning on CBC radio I heard author Benjamin Barber, author of “Consume” saying that we are in the midst of “an economic apocalypse.” And it may not be a ‘little apocalypse.’ Many people who dared to open their financial statements have already felt the seemingly solid foundations of their economic security shudder. And don’t the headlines make it sound like the stars of freemarket capitalism are falling? A couple of weeks ago I heard former US Treasury chief Alan Greenspan, saying effectively: “Oops! I was sure this couldn’t happen!”

Personally, I can get anxious when I hear that my mom (likely many of you who are seniors) has to live on \$300 a month less. And people here who are loosing their work. And then there is our work as a church, and Amnesty’s work as well. How much will our ability to do good be compromised by this economy? These are serious and sad concerns and I can feel gloomy. But will I let it be apocalypse now - or not? Will I let it stop me in my path, passive? The scripture says not to do that.

As always, we have a choice what meaning to make of a crisis. How will we interpret it? How will we choose to feel and act? As people of faith, we, like those first century Christians, always have a moral compass to follow and a community to help us no matter how hard it may be to see ahead on the winding path. If we listen to the writer of Mark, we remember that we have a directive to ‘walk the Jesus walk’ through this economic darkness. We need to be aware and trust in a power source that will always shine light enough, for us to find something new and bright, sustaining and right, about to be born out of this economic gloom.

And lo! With that reminder didn’t I find a glimmering of good. Someone who observed that it seems like the monster of unregulated, free market corporate greed has finally eaten itself. Good old-fashioned capitalism had human sharing and altruism built into it, but its postwar love child - corporate consumerism, grew up corruption, with no moral compass. For decades the false American idol of the

profit motive has been creating wants and addicting consumers, even as most of the world lives in want. But the US nation-wide sub prime mortgage has finally exposed the scam. The mortgage trap that set up so many middle class consumers turned out to be such a big hole that the monster itself fell into it. Well, I hope that system has finally collapsed. And I'm not going to shop to provide it with life support.

Benjamin Barber said in the CBC Friday interview " This disaster is a remarkable opportunity to evaluate how we live." A lot of people are talking about how this Depression may allow us to make a healthier new economic and social order, before its too late for our world. Governments can invest in alternative energy industries and build real roads and rails that create real jobs and serve whole communities. Some of you remember how the last Depression called people to work together in communities and share whatever they had. Those dark economic times twinkled with the birth of new institutions, from social welfare to the co-ops to our precious, endangered public health care system.

This Christmas, I'm inclined to do my best to withdraw my shopping dollars from our consumer-based economy of planned obsolescence that hastens global warming. Barber pointed out that in his lifetime, he has already reproduced his music collection through four different technologies. How many computers have we 'saved' our precious family photos on already? But there is no reason to believe our grandchildren ever be able to see them on our 'primitive' discs. Barber said that no matter how carefully we shop for greener items, the global truth is that whatever is produced, packaged and transported has a carbon footprint. So the less we shop, ultimately the better for our children's world.

If only we can conquer that impulse to shop! That 'should' to Christmas shop. Won't the kids be disappointed? Will they? Its time to ask. When my 24year old son was home for his birthday last month, I asked him what he wanted. He said, "Everybody keeps asking me that, but you know, all my needs are met. And my wants." At 24. What have we done? No wonder he sent us all "OXFAM Unwrapped" donation cards last Christmas. Goats for hungry families. Mosquito

nets for AIDS effected countries. That's what a lot of the conscious young adults really want these days. They already have their Ipods.

There is a lot I love about Christmas gift-giving. When I have time for loving creative gift choices. The rituals of wrapping up and unwrapping surprises. There is some Christmas shopping I have to do, and probably so do you. But what would happen if we tried to minimize our 'should shopping?' Barber offers all of us Christmas-gift-addicted consumers a simple 'Stay Alert!' "Stop, before you shop, and ask yourself: Is there anything else I can do?" For them? To entertain myself?

Hearing that was when the Spirit moved into my Friday morning. I'm going to make up a little card with the labyrinth symbol and something Christmas-y. And wherever I can, rather than carbon footprints, I'm going to make lots of sock-footprints on our labyrinth this season. And each time I walk the Labyrinth this Advent, I'll do it with someone who I want to 'gift' in mind. I'll focus on that person smiling and be conscious of their needs while I walk. Then I'll sign the date and time on my labyrinth Christmas Card and write a real letter. To send with a stamp and arrive in their mailbox. Sometimes I'll add a charitable donation to meet someone else's real need, in their name. Getting a real handwritten Christmas letter from me in the mail again will be a surprise. Like most of my generation, I finally devolved to mass e-mail Christmas missives.

To wind our way through this economic downturn, we can choose to walk the maze of the mall, with all its surprising dead ends, and we might have to. But we can also choose truly Christ-led alternatives to consumerism, born of justice and kindness and this economic crisis. As just one such possibility, I invite you to follow the winding prayerful path of the labyrinth for those you love, and as a gift to yourself. It is one way of being active doing the Master's work while you wait for the Christ coming. The labyrinth path, like the Advent journey can be full of hope and healing. And every time we walk, it leads us surely to the creche, where we really want to centre our Christmas.

Stay Awake! In the midst of this crisis too, the Christ is near!

CHOOSE HOPE not Fear.

Stay Awake! Watch in the darkness for the Light that is surely coming!

BE AWARE and don't miss the good thing about to be born.

Stay Awake! Attend to the Master's work.

YOU HAVE CHRIST POWER. Don't wait passively. Walk that path.

May your Advent labyrinth journey surprise you in its many turnings...always leading you back to the source of the Light!