Sunday, December 1, 2002
MY ADVENT DREAM
Mark 13:24-37

Before I tell you about my Advent dream, I need to put it in perspective. It's helpful to me to understand human beings as living in three worlds at the same time. We are somewhat like a juggler with two hands trying to keep three balls in the air, but of course, all three are rarely in the air at the same time.

The first world in which you live is the relatively small world of your private life. It is the world into which you were born, where you grow up, and where you are nurtured and educated. Here you develop habits, some good and some bad. As you grow up, it is in this world that you make a living, establish a home, maybe get married, make decisions, and follow a daily routine.

The second world you live in is the much larger world of public events. It is made up of the community, state, and nation in which you live. You may or may not take an active part in the events of this world, but they affect your life anyway. It's the world of politics and economics, of boom times and recessions, of war and peace.

There is another world in which you live, and it's more difficult to describe. It is the world not as it is, but as it is meant to be. It is the world of the spirit, the world in which your conscience feels a magnetic pull, the world of moral forces that operate in society. This is the world of visions, of dreams, of hopes and fears. This is the world of imagination and creativity. It is the world of emotions, of joy and sadness, elation and depression. This third world is, in a sense, invisible, yet often becomes visible in a flash of beauty, a deed of truth and goodness, or in a burst of creativity. It is the world of love and of hate. It is this third world that can give perspective and ultimate meaning to your life and help you live successfully and faithfully in the other two worlds. It is in this third world that you discover that you are wired for God.

Each human being lives in all three worlds at once, but not equally at all times. All three are necessary, and you need to stop sometimes and ask, which world am I giving the highest priority? Should it have that priority now? Am I putting all my energy into only one of the three worlds?

One function of the Christian church is to be a sort of "feeding station" for living in this third world of the spiritual. So come with me now into this third world as I describe to you my Advent dream.

Before I tell you my dream, I need to ask, what are some of your dreams during this Advent and Christmas season? Some years ago, Irving Berlin wrote a song about a Christmas dream, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." When I was a child, that was one of my Advent and Christmas dreams, especially that year when I knew I was getting a new sled for Christmas. As I have grown older, I do not dream of "white Christmases." Whether or not we have a white Christmas is not very important to me these days. Because of my vocation, if we do have snow during this season, I hope it's only enough to cover the ground but not enough to make driving difficult. I don't want anything to affect church attendance adversely.

However, every year, for a long time now, I've been having a recurring Advent and Christmas dream. It's a very simple one. My dream is that each one of you, especially during this holy

season, will experience in a fresh way the powerful presence of the loving God as we know God's love through the coming of Jesus into this world.

If you get behind all the vivid images and metaphors in the scripture reading you just heard, that's also the hopeful dream described here. The writer of the gospel of Mark has Jesus saying these words to the inner circle of his disciples — Peter, James, John, and Andrew — during the last week of his life. These four have asked Jesus about what the future will bring. They are worried about all three of the worlds in which they live. They know that opposition to his ministry has been increasing. If he is killed, what will happen to them?

He tells them, and I'm now paraphrasing, "Once I'm gone, there will be false prophets claiming to speak in my name. There will also be other people claiming to be your Messiah. You will suffer on my behalf. There will be wars and rumors of war. There will be good times as well as bad. Everything is changing and will continue to change. But do not worry, I will always be with you. Even though at times I will seem to be far away, I will return to you again and again. If you are faithful and alert, you will be aware of my enduring presence. All things eventually pass away, but my words, my presence will not pass away. Therefore, your main objective is to stay alert, to be ready, for I will keep meeting you in unexpected ways and in surprising places. If you are not alert and ready, you might miss me altogether."

That's what happened that first Advent and Christmas. People, by and large, were not alert and ready. Almost all of the world missed it, even those who were expecting a Messiah and who had predicted it. They missed him because they were looking in all the wrong places and were expecting something quite different than a baby born to a young peasant woman in an out-of-the-way place. It's so easy to not be aware of the presence of God in your everyday life.

Even when Jesus was a grown man, those who expected the coming of the Christ the most rejected him as the promised one because he did not meet their expectations and did not fulfill their dreams. Their dream was not about someone who talked about and practiced the unconditional love of God. Their dream was not about someone who would eat with sinners. Their dream was not about someone who, in his parables, such as the prodigal son, described a God who welcomed people back into God's presence unconditionally.

Their dream was not big enough to imagine a God who defined their neighbor as being anyone who was in need. Their dream was not about someone who would break down the barriers that separate people and call them to do the same. Their dream was not about a Messiah who would give a new understanding to many of their most cherished teachings.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer."

Their dream was not about the Messiah who would say such things as: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

The good news of this season is that God's loving presence continues to come and work among us in unexpected ways. And when God does enter your life in the person of Jesus and in other ways, he doesn't care how you look, how your investments are doing, or how many important messages are waiting for you in your email box or on your answering machine. He is most likely to be present, says the Bible, when you least expect it. For example, he is present when you wonder to yourself whether you did anything that day to honor the gift of your life, or you wonder if anyone you love was made aware of that love while there is still time to make them aware of it.

Advent tells us that he comes on his own schedule. You do not get to decide when this happens or how it happens, for we have it on good authority that no one knows this but God.

Yet the fact is, the love of God in a Christ-like form keeps coming back over and over again into this world, and it is my Advent dream that this will give you hope in a world that is now living under the threat of terrorism and possible war.

Lest you misunderstand, you still have an important part in his coming back over and over again. I say this because, as I study history, I see that again and again, especially in difficult and threatening times, there is a tendency among human beings to expect God to solve all your problems without any effort on your part. You might feel that things are in such a mess that only the intervention of God is capable of undoing what has been done. The role of passive dependency is always easier than a stance of responsible involvement. Who has not, like a little child, wanted to gather up all the broken things and take them to mommy or daddy to fix? The impulse to have someone else come in and solve all our problems is very strong.

But that's the wrong kind of watching and being alert. In my Advent dream, I see you doing more than simply watching and waiting. I see you paying a little more attention to this third world of the spirit in which you live. I see you actually being of help in bringing the presence of Christ into the world by being "Christ" to others and seeing "Christ" in others. I hope you will make my Advent dream your dream also. I hope even more that you can put this dream into practice. Christ comes again whenever you or I, or the church, is Christ to someone else. Amen.