

Catholic Women Preach

Raising Voices, Renewing the Church

CYCLE B

Elizabeth Donnelly and Russ Petrus, Editors

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Introduction

Elizabeth Donnelly and Russ Petrus

We are delighted to offer this second volume of nourishing and challenging preaching from the Catholic Women Preach website, this time for Lectionary Cycle B. (Orbis Books published the Cycle A volume in 2022.) As with the Cycle A volume, we were blessed to be able to choose from two cycles of homilies, in this case from 2017 to 2018 and 2020 to 2021. Again, it was a challenge to select which preaching to include in the printed volume, but all entries—now nearly four hundred!—remain fully accessible on the website. Use the search box to access exceptional preaching by scripture reference, key word(s), or preacher name.

Much of the preaching for this cycle was delivered during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and contains topical references, yet the core messages and values transcend that time and remain relevant in our lives of faith.

As we go to print, the Catholic Women Preach website has been visited nearly 1.5 million times, and our videos have been viewed nearly a half million times, engaging viewers in 37,300 hours or nearly 2.4 million minutes of witnessing Catholic women preach. It is clear that the project both highlights and helps to satisfy the thirst for the voices and contributions of women in our Church.

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Once again, we are deeply grateful to the members of the Catholic Women Preach founding committee. In addition to us they include Jocelyn Collen, Sr. Diana Culbertson, Rita Houlihan, and Deborah Rose. Betty Anne Donnelly and the team at FutureChurch are forever grateful that we discovered our shared vision of what was possible, and hours of dedicated collaboration and planning led us to launch the website with preaching for Advent in 2016.

We would also like to thank those who offered editorial assistance in the first years of the website: Diana Culbertson, OP; Marianne Race, CSJ; Janet Schlichting, OP; and Mary Ann Wiesemann-Mills, OP.

We are most grateful also for the wise counsel and support of our distinguished advisory board members: M. Shawn Copeland; Richard Gaillardetz; Thomas Groome; Nontando Hadebe; Mary Catherine Hilker, OP; James Keenan, SJ; Raymond Kemp; Paul Lakeland; Astrid Lobo Gajiwala; James Martin, SJ; Rhonda Miska; Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ; Brian Pierce, OP; Christine Schenk, CSJ; and Jude Siciliano, OP.

Once again, we warmly thank Robert Ellsberg for encouraging us to edit this three-volume collection following the liturgical calendar. We look forward to working on the Cycle C volume, to be published in 2024!

Our heartfelt thanks go again to Kelly Sankowski for her superb editorial assistance. Kelly communicated with each of the sixty-six contributors we selected, proposed titles, and compiled all the edits and changes to the texts and updates to the biographies. It was a monumental task, which Kelly made look easy.

We are also most grateful to our friend Cecilia González-Andrieu for her simply stunning foreword. She is indeed one of the stellar leaders on the prophetic edge of the church who urge us to engage more wholeheartedly and joyfully in God's vision of radical inclusion and universal flourishing.

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We are honored to feature the gorgeous artwork of Laura James once again on the cover. This is a detail of a most compelling painting, *Mary Magnificat*, which was commissioned by FutureChurch in 2015 and can be viewed in its entirety at <https://futurechurch.org/mary-magnificat>.

Then of course there are the sixty-six contributors themselves. Catholic Women Preach would not exist without the extraordinary, faith-filled, insightful women whose wisdom and witness have helped us make sense of our lived realities and more tenaciously follow the path of discipleship in today's world. We hope that you enjoy these companions on the road over the course of the liturgical year.

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Together, let us watch

ELIZABETH DONNELLY

Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

Psalms 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:33-37

Happy Advent! Today we begin a new liturgical year, so perhaps it's a good time to review our relationship with our loving God and how we can commit ourselves to more active discipleship in a fraught world that so desperately needs it.

Advent is one of the shortest seasons, just four weeks long, symbolized by the four candles we light on the Advent wreath. In my family, ever since our daughters were little, we have enjoyed lighting the candles at our dinner table. We always sing a verse of "O Come O Come Emmanuel" before saying grace, and now that they're older, we even manage a little harmony.

Advent is commonly seen as a time of preparation for the Lord's coming, both at Christmas and at his second coming at the end of time. And yet I have always *chafed* against a sense of passivity in the way Advent is portrayed as a season of waiting and watching. If, however, we take a closer look at our gospel reading today, we see that Advent is clearly a time

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when Jesus is calling us to both carefully notice God's action around us and faithfully act as disciples. As St. Ignatius said, we are called to be contemplatives in action.

So why does the Church choose to start the new liturgical year with *this* gospel reading? You would think that since this is the year that we will focus on the Gospel of Mark, we would begin today at its beginning. But on this First Sunday of Advent we begin by being reminded of the big picture, what we need to focus on, that is, the coming of the reign of God, which will be the definitive flourishing of God's love, justice, and peace throughout all of creation. Jesus is calling us here to live lives of constant, faithful, active vigilance in service of God's reign.

I invite you to the delights of biblical scholarship—it's like satisfying detective work! Today's reading is located at the end of the thirteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel. Scholars believe that Mark's was the first of the four canonical gospels to be written down, most likely in Rome in the decade of the sixties, precisely at a time when the Christian community in Rome lived under the threat of persecution, and some of the Jewish people in Palestine were engaged in a rebellion against their Roman occupiers. Tragically, in the year 70, the Romans destroyed the revered temple in Jerusalem. All that is left is a portion of the Western Wall, known as the Wailing Wall.

Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and warns his disciples of possible future wars, natural disasters, and persecution before the Son of God will come again in glory. It is a frightening reading—and sounds all too familiar with recent events worldwide. And then, in chapter 14, Jesus journeys to his own Passion and death. Mark inserts this short parable between the two grim narratives to assure and encourage us.

The destruction of the temple, the center of the Jewish people's religious life and symbol of their nationhood, was devastating. When people of any age—then and today—face

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such trials and tribulations, they can become spiritually deadened, paralyzed, and divided. So in Mark's thirteenth chapter, Jesus urges his disciples to patiently and confidently keep faith. He encourages them not to be taken in by false prophets or worry or despair about events to come, because in all things God will be with them. Apt advice indeed for today.

What is so interesting is that at this very point in Mark's Gospel, which we don't get to appreciate in the English translation, Jesus shifts the verb he uses to refer to watching. In describing and predicting the tribulations to come in the first part of chapter 13, Mark has Jesus use the Greek verb *blepo*, which means seeing in the sense of spiritually discerning as you observe what's going on around you, so that you as a disciple won't be misled. But in verse 33, the beginning of our reading, he switches to the Greek verb *gregoreo*, which means to watch, be vigilant, and *act* faithfully. It's where we get the name Gregory. So our spiritual perception and discernment about what is happening around us (*blepo*) must also lead to faithful, vigilant action (*gregoreo*).

In our parable, Jesus is the man traveling abroad; he has ascended to be with God. He has left "home" that is, the community of disciples on God's earth, and has placed his servants "in charge." Jesus has given his servants authority and responsibility to act on his behalf until his return; all is entrusted to us.

Each of us servants has her or his own work, with an unspecified gatekeeper being ordered to be on the watch. But Jesus is exhorting all of his disciples to watch: "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'" (v. 37).

In the parable Jesus invokes the four Roman watches of the night to suggest times when we as disciples are less likely to be vigilant. What is it to watch in the twenty-first century? One problem is that we watch too much!! Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week we have constant information on our

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TVs, laptops and smartphones—they all have the potential to distract us from discipleship, or, if we use them wisely, they can be effective tools. Do we take the time for prayerful discernment to watch how God's reign is unfolding in history? Do we truly look through the lens of our faith and identify the serious obstacles that impede the full flourishing of God's love, and thus demand our attention—things like widespread hunger, poverty, and war? One obvious difference between our own time and that of Mark's listeners is our globalized economy. Isn't Jesus calling us to be attentive to the urgent challenges facing the least of our sisters and brothers worldwide?

I also encourage you to reflect, during this Advent season, on who can serve as examples for us of people who have watched, who are wholehearted, generous disciples? In our own day, Advent is a good time to look to the examples of the martyrs of El Salvador whose anniversaries we celebrate at this time of year. Their faith-filled discernment of injustice and subsequent work with and on behalf of the poor led to their deaths. On November 16 we marked the anniversary of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter, and on December 2 we honor the four U.S. churchwomen who were murdered in 1980. I had the privilege of speaking at length with Jean Donovan and Martin Barro, SJ, shortly before they were killed, and both were fully aware that what they were doing put them at risk of sharing the same fate as thousands of Salvadorans, most of whom have gone unnamed and unnoticed beyond their own immediate families and neighbors.

While most of us are not called to martyrdom, finally I do urge you to take time during Advent to prayerfully discern what is the work to which Jesus is calling *you* to serve the reign of God. The good news is that we are not called to watch alone. Presumably the servants of the house collaborate in their work! We are called to rejoice in and support the gifts

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others have been given to work for God's reign, just as the apostle Paul does in his letter to the Christian community at Corinth that serves as today's second reading. Together Jesus calls to us, with all our failings, our apathy, our misplaced priorities, and yet our hope: "*Gregoreite!!*" Together, let us watch—and relish this Advent season!