

Mark 13:24-37

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Welcome to Advent! This season in the liturgical year is about expectation, about waiting for Christ. But often it seems our focus is only for the Jesus in the manger. And as important as it is for us to see that the birth of the Jesus is a humble one, Advent isn't just about waiting for the baby in the manger. It's about expecting Christ here, in our own messed-up lives, right now. And boy, are things in our world messed up right now!

The Gospel passage may be about Jesus' second coming, but it speaks to us also in the here and now. We are called to watchful for Christ's return, but we are also called to be aware of the many ways Christ appears in our present day. Are we alert to see where Christ arrives, breaking through time and space to be present in our lives and the lives of others? And—more to the point—are we willing to be participants in God's unfolding action in our world as the feet and hands of Christ no matter what our life situation is?

Perhaps you've seen the story which has gone viral online. It's the story of Johnny Bobbitt Jr. He's a homeless Pennsylvania veteran who recently made national news. I spent some time looking into all of the reports about him and here's what I found...

It all started back last month when a young woman named Katie McClure was on her way home from work on Interstate 95 near Philadelphia. That's when she ran out of gas. Not the best of areas for a 27 year old woman to be alone and stranded.

But, as the story goes, McClure wasn't alone for long. A homeless man with a long scraggly beard, named Johnny Bobbitt saw her. "He saw me pull over and knew something was wrong," McClure said. Bobbitt usually sits on the side of the road each day. "He told me to get back in the car and lock the doors. A few minutes later, he comes back with a red gas can. Using his last \$20 to make sure I could get home safe."

And she did...For many the story would have ended there, but this one didn't. McClure told the Philadelphia Inquirer that she and her boyfriend, Mark D'Amico, were determined to help Bobbitt after the incident. They started with getting him some warm clothing, food and supplies as well as money. They were surprised because when Johnny was presented with these items, he was excited to share them with a few of the guys who hung out with him.

McClure and her boyfriend were so taken. "We were like, 'Man, if we could change this guy's life,' " McClure said. "And that's when we came up with the idea of GoFundMe (an online funding page)."

Thousands of dollars began pouring in from everywhere. To this date, that effort has raised nearly \$400, 000 from big and small donations by thousands of people like you and me who have heard of Johnny's generosity and want to do the same for him.

The news went national, even international, and people who have known Bobbitt began responding, filling in pieces of who he is and how he ended up on the side of the road. People said the Raleigh, NC native had been an ammunition technician in the Marines. After his service, he had been a firefighter and a paramedic, flying the helicopter for the medical center in Chapel Hill, NC. They also told how Johnny's life had taken a downturn. "The friend, who did not want to be identified by name, said Johnny's life took an unfortunate turn because of drugs, and eventually money problems. According to public records, he had involvement with the criminal justice system in North Carolina." After Bobbitt's story went public, a local newspaper reported that he had been homeless in Philadelphia for more than a year..."

With all of the twists and turns in his story, the character of Johnny Bobbitt still shines through. In an interview on national television last Sunday, Bobbitt humbly says that he plans to donate some of the money raised on his behalf to organizations that help those in need... Bobbitt said, "I just want to do the right thing," he said. "This money was given to help me. Why not help other people in similar situations or people that are actively helping other people in different situations?...Everybody out there is facing some kind of struggle, so if I can touch their life, the way mine was touched, [it'd be] an amazing feeling. I want to feel the feeling on the opposite end."

And of that \$20 for a can of gas? "I just got her gas to help her get back on her way. I didn't think anything about it. I wasn't expecting anything in return," he shared. "That's how I got the money to start with — from other people. [I had to] return the favor. I can't constantly take and not give back."

Various stories indicate that Johnny's journey has not only been devastating to him but to his family as well. Johnny's mother wrote on Facebook that she hopes the intervention will inspire her son to make better choices. She said she and her husband were very thankful to hear the news. "I'm sure everyone has heard the story of the homeless man in Philadelphia that helped the lady whose car ran out of gas. Yes that is our son. We haven't had any contact with him in a long time so we are thankful that he is okay. We all make mistakes and bad choices but it is never too late to turn things around. Johnny worked hard to become a very good paramedic but bad choices got in the way. But hopefully, thanks to the generosity of so many, Johnny will choose to get the help that he needs and fulfill dreams that have been buried. Thanks for all the calls and messages but we ask that everyone respect our privacy. Please keep our family in your prayers."

Johnny's own Facebook page indicated a very different life than the one he was living now. There were references to a girlfriend and pictures of a clean cut, young man who was very

much in shape. This quote was listed too: ***“I understood myself only after I destroyed myself; and only in the process of fixing myself, did I know who I really was.”*** (Sade Andria Zabala)

McClure and D’Amico told the Inquirer, they plan to manage the donations and use the money to provide for the deposit for an apartment and rent for Bobbitt , pay for his food, clothing, and buy him a used car to help him get back on his feet. He says he wants to work at an Amazon warehouse nearby. Maybe this intervention of love and kindness will help him get there.

In his Gospel, Mark isn’t pointing us to a future apocalypse (or a “revealing”) but rather a present one, as Christ’s death and resurrection change absolutely everything. For once Jesus suffers all that the world and empire and death have to throw at him...and is raised to new life!...then nothing will ever be the same again. Including our present lives and situations.

Key to that effort will be to recognize that God comes to us as we are. Not as the people we are trying to be or have promised to be or so very badly want to be, but the people we are. The families we are. The congregations we are. The communities we are. The nation and world that we are. Is there room for improvement in all these areas? Of course, but the best way to create energy to change is to offer the powerful word of blessing that who we are just now is, however imperfect, still beloved of God.

Perhaps more than any of the other Gospels, Mark offers a distinctly apocalyptic view of not only Jesus but the Christian life. Not, mind you, apocalyptic in the “end of the world” sense, but rather in the sense of pulling back the curtain of false hopes and realities in order to reveal God’s commitment to enter into and redeem our lives and world just as they are. Which may offer us the opportunity to look around us – in the pew, in our families, in our schools and places of work and volunteering – with new eyes. Eyes that see in the people around us – whether they be similar or different – gifts of God who, while as imperfect as we are, are nevertheless meant to be loved and treasured just as God loves and treasures us.

NEW LIFE THERE

(Mark 13: 24-37)

From the fig tree learn this lesson:

budding leaves say summer’s near,

sign of joy in time of dryness,

sign of hope in time of fear.

Tree of joy bloom in our sorrow,

tree of hope bloom in despair,
tree of peace bloom from tomorrow;
show us that there's new life there.

Show us those who wait for justice
will not have to wait in vain.
Show the hungering and thirsting
they will find release from pain.

Word of joy speak in our sorrow,
word of hope speak in despair,
word of peace speak from tomorrow;
point us to the new life there.

Help us stay awake and watching
till the weary night is o'er.
Help us be alert and faithful
to the One who's at the door.

Lord of joy break through our sorrow,
Lord of hope break through despair,
Lord of peace come from tomorrow;
lead us to the new life there.

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