

Keep Awake

Mark 13:24-37 – First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2011 – Browns Point UMC
Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

This text from Mark's gospel, and especially the story of the homeowner being away and the servants keeping watch over the house, not knowing when he might return, reminds me a bit of my own growing up, when I would stay home alone with instructions to get my homework done or clean my room... and I would have to carefully apportion my television-watching time so that when my mother returned home, no matter how long she had been gone, I would not have been watching situation comedies long enough for the box to be warm when she went over and put her hand on top of it, which she was known to do. So I either had to stop watching TV well before she got home, leaving a generous cushion around the time I thought she might return, or I had to watch only in short spurts so that the TV never got too warm. Kids these days, with their flat-panel LCDs and plasmas, have it all too easy. They can just wait until they hear the garage door and flip the remote – or switch from Netflix or Hulu to some kind of educational endeavor on their laptops – no need to stay alert, to pay attention, to prepare.

“Keep awake,” the gospel tells us today: no one knows the day or hour that Christ will come. There may be signs, but you have to pay attention. “Be on guard,” Mark says... “Do not let him find you sleeping.”

Perhaps this seems absurd for us to read on the first Sunday of Advent. We have gotten past Thanksgiving, we have done our Black Friday shopping, we have pulled the dusty Christmas decorations out of the attic or garage and are counting the days, making plans, wrapping gifts. The church is decorated with familiar greens and blues, and we welcome the opportunity to light this wreath of candles once again. We come today expecting to sing Christmas carols (after all, they're on the radio 24/7 now) and hoping to hear a sweet familiar story about a town called Bethlehem – and perhaps we feel like we *need* that, in the midst of this crazy busy season when the back-to-school rush has met up with the holiday madness and we have even more on our plates and our calendars than the overwhelming array of activities we crammed in last month. But we don't get a sweet story about Bethlehem today – we're deep in Mark's gospel, with grown-up Jesus telling us to keep awake for his *second* coming, a time we cannot and should not try to predict, but for which we should always be prepared.

One thing that's neat about reading this text this Sunday is that it puts us in a place that parallels those who waited for the Messiah in that first Advent season. We know who is coming – the baby in the manger; and how he will arrive – born to a young unmarried couple in a humble town; and when, precisely, he will get here: we are likely counting down the days we have left to get everything done. But those who waited for the Messiah for the first time were clueless: they didn't know who they would get – most expected some kind of warrior king or military general who would defeat all of their enemies; they didn't know how he would arrive, or how they would get word of his arrival – they hadn't suspected a baby born to a virgin, or a heavenly host singing his praises; they didn't know when he was coming – they just had to be ready and look for signs, things like stars and angels. And as we think about Christ coming again, we are in that same boat: nobody knows the day or hour; we just have to be ready. All of us need the gospel's exhortation to stay awake, to pay attention – we who are waiting for the second coming, along with those who waited for the first.

But the “stay awake” mantra might seem out-of-touch with our life in this season and year of this part of the world. At least at my house, where we have a toddler and a geriatric dog, both of whom regularly wake us up in the wee hours of the morning, we are more often chanting “Go to sleep” than “Stay awake.” And you might be thinking, “Well shoot, I’m already awake more hours than I should be, with my job and my family and these holiday preparations – I’m totally sleep-deprived and overcaffeinated and revved up with busyness trying to get everything done before Christmas Eve when I will likely stay up half the night assembling some plastic monstrosity for which Santa Claus will get all the credit.” Pastor Lillian Daniel has said, “it strikes me this may...be the season to pass out the sleeping pills or...chamomile tea [in church]” instead of urging everyone to stay awake.¹

But I think the dissonance we feel here is because our overcaffeinated, overscheduled, making-lists-in-the-middle-of-the-night selves, and the world’s busyness in general, are directed at **the coming of Christmas, not the arrival of Christ**. We are counting shopping days, figuring out what to bake and when to decorate and how to wrap and clean and where to hide it all so it’ll be a surprise. We’re looking for the elaborate, the expensive, the extraordinary to lavish on our family and impress our friends and neighbors – and it’s easy, in all this running around, to miss Jesus entirely. *It’s easy for us to tune all this out, to see the decorations and light the candles but not actually process what’s about to happen or how we should prepare for it:* we become like the folks who buy their house near the railroad tracks, and pretty soon they sleep right through the sound of that midnight train. It’s easy for us to listen to so many Christmas carols that we forget the joy that is actually coming to the world – that has come and is coming again in 4 short weeks and at some date we cannot predict. We overlook who that baby in the manger will be and how his presence has changed and will continue to change the world. We forget how absurd it is to think it must have been a silent, picturesque night, when surely it was a night full of stinky, braying donkeys and the screams of childbirth and a crying newborn and first-time parents full of anxiety with nowhere to sleep and no clue what this child would mean in their lives or in the life of the world. *We can get so accustomed to Christmas traditions that we miss the coming of Christ altogether.*

And so Mark’s gospel tells us here, on the first Sunday of this season of preparation, when it isn’t too late, when we haven’t missed it all yet – to WAKE UP. Because God is about to do something extraordinary, and we don’t want to be so caught up in our decorations and presents, in our recitation of the regular Christmas script, or in our low expectations, that we miss the miracle entirely.

Christ doesn’t come on our regular schedule, according to our Advent calendars or our vacation time. Christmas doesn’t happen when we get ready, when we’ve crossed all the names off of our lists and put all the packages under the tree. Nor does it happen the way we plan: it’s all about listening to the heart of God to hear what *God* will do, which will almost certainly out-dazzle what we had in mind. After all, the creator of the universe came to earth as a tiny, helpless baby, born in a stable to a humble, perhaps impoverished couple. Our text from Isaiah reminds us that God does awesome things we do not expect – God does not live by our rules or follow our schedules; and to prepare for Christmas, we must try to *replace our own limited expectations* of stockings hung by the chimney and slightly-tense family gatherings with what God has in mind, **which is transformation of the world**. *That* is what we’re waiting for during Advent. *That* is what

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 1, p. 20.

we expect when God breaks into our world and into our lives once again. *That* is why we wait and for what we prepare: transformation of the world.

Now, to wait in expectation during Advent is not to wait passively. It's not the businessman waiting at the bus stop, who will look up from his smartphone only when the bus pulls up in front of him and opens the door. It's the child waiting for the first glimpse of the parade to turn the corner, or yearning to see the yellow of the school bus on the first day of first grade. It's the parents painting the room and reading the books and praying daily for the child they will welcome into their family. It's the runner who trains and eats fastidiously until race day, preparing as best she can. It's not just getting our homes ready for the holiday, but getting our lives ready for the in-breaking of God's presence among us. It's looking around to see the signs of God's presence already – because Christ *has* come, even if he is still coming again. When we do this, when we are awake to the movement of the Spirit in our lives and in the world, we begin to live in the reign that is still coming, we begin to experience what the realm of God will be like. And that is not the tiring, dizzying to-do-list-filled schedule of pre-Christmas: it's the joy-filled, peace-bringing, hopeful preparation of Advent, when we are so prepared, so expecting the transformation of the world that it begins to happen right in front of us.

If we get to December 25, and you are exhausted and depleted and already sick of Christmas, then you have missed it. The train has passed through your backyard and you have slept right through the whistle. But if we get there, and you are floored by the mystery of the incarnation, amazed by the totally unrealistic but completely real miracles that God enacts through ordinary people and everyday situations, energized by the work of the living God in your own life and in the world around you, *then* you will have experienced Christmas, and you will have made yourself ready for Christ to come again. Then you will have done Advent well and not just prepared for Christmas Day. The good news is there's still time: we haven't missed it all yet. Keep awake, my friends: Christ is coming, and will break into our lives and into the world with miracles we would not believe if we were told. Christ is coming.

Glory to God, Amen.