

Keep Awake!

Sermon for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church

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Text: Mark 13: 24-37

Theme: In the midst of all this strange Second Coming language, this passage offers us amazing hope in the midst of all of our longing and suffering and waiting: we are not alone, we are not forgotten, and the love of God will win in the end.

This is, without a doubt one of the oddest Sundays of the year. As the world around us explodes in color and lights, and the sounds of Christmas carols resound from radios and store speakers, we in the church are left with mournful purple, one candle, and Advent hymns. And then there's our reading. We are surrounded by a panorama of renditions of Mary holding the baby Jesus in ever-more un-historical mangers, while in the church we read about how "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven..."

In my opinion, there is no Sunday of the year when the church is more out of step with the world around us – a world supposedly preparing to celebrate a holiday the church created. In this season the cultural messages tell us all to be thankful for what we have, to be filled with joy, and to rejoice in togetherness with family. Meanwhile in the church – for just a little bit – we remember that things are still very much not right in this world, there is agonizing pain and suffering that touches so many lives, and our human family is very far from living together in peace.

Advent literally means "coming," and while the world around us is very happy to embrace the story of the coming of the baby Jesus some 2,000 years ago, there's a strong note of dissonance when, particularly on this first Sunday in Advent we in the church emphasize the second, more future-oriented meaning of the season and look towards Jesus' second coming. Rather than a warm and happy celebration, the church – at least for a moment – looks directly at what is missing in our lives and world, embraces the pain of longing, and dwells in the agony of seemingly endless waiting.

In the midst of our holiday warmth, our reading today feels like a blast of ice-cold reality. As one commentator put it, “Lighting our candles, we see ourselves again as dwelling in darkness. Despite all the lights and noise of Christmas commerce, the world is cold and in need. God is not here.”¹ At least, not enough, not yet.

This stark contrast between our passage and the holidayed-up world in which we spend our daily lives can, understandably, produce some very different reactions. For some of us still in the glow of Thanksgiving and moving joyfully into the Christmas season, it can be very confusing. “Sure there are things wrong with the world, but generally things are pretty good. Shouldn’t we just be happy and thankful?” Others might feel annoyed or even a bit angry. Scriptures like these may be an unpleasant and unwelcome reminder of pain they carry inside or the pain that quietly surrounds us. “I just want to escape all that, so can’t you just let me be happy?” Lastly, there are some of us who hear these words of Jesus and breathe a huge sigh of relief. “At last! For at least one moment I don’t have to fake it and pretend like everything’s alright. I’m not alone.”

Now, I’m not going to fake it either – it’s for this last group that I think this passage has the most powerful message of good news. That’s not to say there isn’t something meaningful for all of us here. For the main thrust of our text today is Jesus’ admonishment to “keep awake!” He repeats some variation of keep awake, keep alert, be on the watch five times in the latter half of our passage. At the end in v. 37 he even breaks the dramatic “third wall” and turns directly to us, the audience, and tells us to “keep awake.”

There are plenty of different ways of interpreting and applying that message. But to me, when you get down to it, this passage is about keeping awake the hope that Christ brings – a hope that declares despite all evidence to the contrary that this world filled with injustice and all of us who suffer our individual agonies have not been left abandoned, Jesus is coming in power and in love to set things right.

But before I say more on that, let’s look more deeply at what is going on in our passage.

¹ John Stendahl, “Advent Alchemy” in *The Christian Century*, 6 November 2002.

First, this passage is a direct challenge to those now and throughout history who have been obsessed with the details of Jesus' second coming. Those who search the news headlines for signs and make claims about the exact date of Jesus' second coming need to read their Bibles, especially Mark 13: 32, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

I've personally had the misfortune to be lectured at by those who think they can read the signs of Christ's return. I'm sure that many of Mark's original hearers thought they could read the signs as well, after all they were living through the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans and the slaughter of the Jewish rebels. Four hundred years later it must have seemed like the end of the world was coming when the barbarians overran Rome and the mighty Empire crumbled. The point is that throughout history terrible, awful, unbelievable tragedies have befallen the people of God, and it has never meant God was bringing the world to an end. One of the main points of this passage is to tamp down that kind of ridiculous speculation.

For we have seen what happens when charismatic leaders make their predictions about the day and the hour. The results run the spectrum from the horror of mass suicides to the ridiculousness of websites telling Christians to give their pets to Jews.

Besides being in contradiction with Scripture, obsessing over dates for Jesus' return leads to a perspective of detachment from the lives of our fellow human beings. That is quite clearly the opposite of what Jesus is calling for in this passage. Jesus doesn't want us dozing off into delusional dreams, Jesus wants us to keep awake to the needs of the world around us.

For many of us this last admonishment connects well with our own perspective, and leads to a second lesson from our passage: "Keep awake," in one sense means to be about Christ's work in the world right now. The last portion of our passage indeed pictures the challenge to the disciples and also to us as being "like a man (Jesus) going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves (that's us) in charge, each with his work..."

There is quite a lot to be said for this perspective. Jesus in our passage is clearly trying to calm down those obsessed with the details of his second coming and clearly wants us to be about his work. We have heard a number of Christ's strong admonishments to continue his ministry of justice and love over these last few weeks. To have a little fun with that, one might say this particular lesson of our passage lends itself well to the tongue-in-cheek bumper sticker summary: "Jesus is coming – look busy!"

All joking aside, there is indeed a very serious call in our passage today to continue to work for justice for all, to share God's love, and to grow in faith. Jesus' words add a sense of urgency to our holy pursuits, and for many of us this is an aspect of the second coming we can sink our teeth into. The work of love cannot wait and we cannot get lazy in our faith – whether as individuals or as churches – so keep alert and keep awake for God's call.

The third, and most significant, theme of this passage is that we are to keep awake, keep alive the hope that this passage brings. In the midst of all of its seemingly jumbled and disjointed images we hear some powerful messages of hope. To Christians living under the oppressive and brutal rule of Rome, which claimed to shine like the sun and rule heaven and earth, the opening proclamation of Jesus in our passage that "the powers in the heavens will be shaken" meant that he, Jesus, was and is more powerful than any force in the heavens or on the earth. Jesus is coming back, and nothing can stop him.

Furthermore, to those first disciples who saw Jesus taken away from them – first to be crucified and then into heaven – Jesus' statement about himself that "they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory" meant that they would not be left abandoned. They were not left alone to suffer, Jesus was coming back for them. Jesus is coming back for us.

Lastly, when Jesus said "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place," there may be a bit of a healthy deceit going on here. You and I know that the literalist understanding of these words by some of the first Christians meant to them that they would not die before Jesus came again. But they did die – and so many have died, and yet Jesus has not returned. And, yet, they were not deceived and were not forgotten, they are all in the hands of our eternal, loving Savior.

Folks, we don't know if Jesus will come back tomorrow or ten thousand years from now, but his return is imminent and it is inevitable. We have not been forgotten. That's what the first Christians needed to hear and that's what we need to hear as well.

For we desperately need this message of hope: that our Savior is greater than any power on heaven and earth, that he has not forgotten or abandoned us, and he is coming back soon to bring us into his loving embrace – us and the whole world.

We need to hear this message of hope because we are still waiting. We are waiting for wars to end in Iraq and Afghanistan – and so many other places around this world. We are waiting for violence to leave our streets, our homes, and our airplanes. We are waiting for all the world's people to have enough to eat, clean water to drink, and a place to call home.

On a personal level, many of us are also waiting. Some are waiting for a cure to the disease that is destroying our body or that of a loved one. Some are waiting for an end to their aching loneliness. Some are waiting for life to really begin. Some are waiting for the pain of loss or trauma to lessen so that life can go on. Some are waiting to have a child. Some are waiting for their children to come home. Some are waiting for the healing of a broken relationship. Some are waiting for a time when they will see friends and loved ones who have gone home to be with the Lord. Some are waiting to feel safe again. Some are waiting to know the meaning of peace and of love.

In all our waiting, in all our anguish, and in all our despair this passage offers us a hope that is stronger even than death: we are not alone, we are not forgotten, and the love of God will win in the end.

To conclude where we began, when we are confronted with today's Advent Gospel passage admonishing us to "keep awake," there are lots of different ways we can react. We can simply ignore and dismiss it and get on with our holiday shopping and party planning. Or we can let it disturb us a little and motivate us to action in service to God in sharing Christ's love. Not a bad option at all. But we can also soak up, store up that hope beyond all practicality that has sustained or forbearers in faith – whether the first Christians under Roman persecution or the African-American slaves in this country.

For at some point we are all need that hope, whether it's when we take an honest look at the wider world around us – both close to home and far away – or whether it is when we are overcome by our own grief, suffering, and struggles of life. We all need that hope that our Savior is greater than any power on heaven and earth, that he has not forgotten or abandoned us, and he is coming back soon to bring his justice and to embrace us with his arms of love – us and the whole world. In that hope, keep awake.

In Jesus' name, Amen.