

Keep Awake

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Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

It has been mentioned several times already that this morning is the first Sunday of Advent, Advent being a season of waiting and preparing for the coming of Jesus. In secular celebrations there are advent calendars that help children or adults countdown to Christmas; each day of December when you open a door you get a piece of chocolate or treat. I even have a dog treat advent calendar at home which my pups love but I don't think they are waiting or preparing for anything. But culturally Advent marks the beginning of December and it marks the countdown to Christmas morning when we can open presents and celebrate with our family and closest friends. Advent is when the weather is cold outside, homes are decorated with lights and we listen to jolly music. We spend our time decorating our homes, attending holiday parties, purchasing gifts for our families and friends, and enjoying the most wonderful season of all.

Unfortunately, the folks who picked the Advent Lectionary readings didn't get the memo about all the joy we are supposed to be having. Our scripture readings this morning plunges us into unsettling imagery of mountains quaking, nations trembling, and the sun and moon darkening. One would not be blamed for thinking that this is a somber way to begin our Advent journey together. Didn't we just light the candle of hope? How do we reconcile the anticipation of a joyous Christmas season with the stark warnings and foreboding language found in our Gospel reading?

In the Gospel of Mark chapter 13 is often referred to as Mark's "little Apocalypse." The word apocalypse is rooted in the Greek word for "revelation." So, an apocalypse is an uncovering or an unveiling of truth that cannot be seen with human eyes or understood with the human mind; there must be a special revelation to understand God's purposes. For example, at the beginning of chapter 13, the disciples are enamored by the scale and beauty of the Jerusalem temple exclaiming, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (13:1). To which Jesus reveals to them that the temple will soon be destroyed. But this is not outside of God's will, this is in fact a part of God's plan. The Apocalypse is both the prediction AND the revelation about why it will happen.

Mark 13 is full of Jesus' teachings and warning about the end of the world. Throughout the chapter Jesus warns of social chaos, that there will be "wars and rumors of war." He instructs his disciples to beware of coming persecutions and betrayals stating "brothers will betray brothers, father will betray their children, and children will rise against their parents" and he tells his disciples they will be hated by all because of his name. Before we get too down in the dumps hearing about all this coming gloom one biblical scholar states:

To some extent, this is Jesus at his pastoral best. That which looks like devastation and defeat will be God's victory. Out of the theological turmoil and confusion surrounding the destruction of the temple will be a new presence of God. Out of the suffering and death of their Messiah will be a new life.

*God's new way of being in the world will turn a cross into resurrection and a baby in a manger into salvation for the world.*¹

Our passage today from chapter 13 Jesus uses imagery of the entire Cosmos coming to an end. The Sun and moon darkening, and The Son of Man coming in the clouds to gather his elect, and Jesus states "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father. Beware, Keep alert for you do not know when the time will come... Jesus says "I say to you I say to all "keep awake."

This is challenging scripture to wrestle with. As I prepared for this sermon this week, I struggled/ wrestled with this passage. One of the many reasons I wrestled with this text is that in my past this passage (and others similar to it in Matthew and Luke) were used as biblical proof of the "rapture". For those of you who do not know what that means there are some Christians who believe that when Jesus returns in the 2nd coming, he will come and take all the Christians away to heaven, and everyone else will be left on earth to deal. As I say this out loud I feel vulnerable and absurd saying it, but as a child I was part of a church that believed this and regularly discussed it, and so I was terrified for most of my childhood that Jesus would be returning to take my family away and I would be left behind. (There were multiple times in my childhood when someone wasn't where I thought there should be and I was certain that I had been left behind).

I want to be clear, that I don't believe this idea any longer; however, the trauma of that childhood fear comes up when I read this text, and part of the continuing trauma is that I don't believe in the rapture, but I don't fully know what to do with Jesus' words.

The first week of Advent presents us with one of the hardest paradoxes of the Christian Faith, the already/not yet part of our faith. The part of our faith that believes Jesus came and lived but will also come again. The part of our faith that is mysterious and hard to grasp. The part of our faith that asks us to embrace mystery. The part of our faith that asks us to be ready and prepared and vigilant even though we don't exactly know what we are waiting, preparing, and being vigilant for. We enter into the season of advent with a sense of expectation and preparation, but in these texts we are not preparing for the Christmas morning of our traditions, we are waiting for Jesus to come again, and what that will be like no one knows. One biblical scholar states:

*"This text asks us to consider the difference between waiting for Christmas and waiting for Christ. Obviously, we know when Christmas will arrive and what it will be like when it does. We know the script and all we need to do is follow it. But waiting for Christ to come -or come again- requires something more, an expectant watchfulness, because we never know when he will appear."*²

The reality is that the arrival Jesus in our lives is disruptive, and it might feel as though mountains are shaking, and the world is coming to an end. That which we hold close that which makes us feel safe, and secure, will be challenged. So even though I don't believe in a mysterious rapture

¹ Working preacher **Courtney V. Buggs**

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-1324-37-5>

² Feasting on the Word, Martin B. Copenhaver

coming to whisk people away, I do think that this text is still very challenging because it is asking me and it is asking you, are we really ready for Jesus to return?

Are we Awake? Are we ready? In the following chapter of Mark, The disciples are asked to stay awake In the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus implored them to stay awake, to be vigilant in prayer. But they were too tired and fell asleep.

How might this season of advent be a time of waking up and opening our lives to the coming of Jesus.

Last week I was away celebrating Thanksgiving with close friends. Friends who we regularly celebrate Thanksgiving with, this year was a bit different because about nine months ago they had their first child, and the baby was with us celebrating his first Thanksgiving. One night I asked the baby's mom what has it been like since he was born, to which she replied "Everything about me is different. My whole life has changed, every priority I had seems different now. I never expected to be so changed." This week I have been thinking about her statements in relationship to our Advent expectations and waiting. It might not seem hopeful or good news that Jesus coming back to reorient tear down, and change everything about our lives and world, but as we wait for a baby to be born, and as we expectantly wait for Jesus to come again, I realized this week the good news is similar to new parents' lives being radically changed by a new born baby, or how a person's life is turned upside down when they fall in love and get married. Or how when a how a young adult's life is completely made new when leave home for the first time, moving into college or starting that first job.

As we prepare for advent, we must be prepared and awake for the moments when Jesus breaks in, Jesus will shake our foundations, and take away the things we cling to for comfort. Advent is not merely a season of preparing for all of our beloved Christmas traditions. Rather, in Mark 13, we are urged to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man. When Jesus comes again everything will change, but it is good news, it is the kind of change and disruption that it totally worth it, and something we all long for. We want to be changed and made new by the good news. This Advent season we are asked to stay awake to the unexpected ways God is at work in our lives, even if it means facing the discomfort of our metaphorical mountains quaking. In the midst of the cosmic turmoil, we do find hope, not in the absence of difficulty, but in the assurance that God's Kingdom is breaking in, bringing forth transformation and new life.