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“Keep Awake!”

Mark 13: 24-37

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Happy Liturgical New Year! Today, the first day of Advent represents the first day of the season leading up to the high holy day of Christmas: the day we celebrate the incarnation of God—God With Us—in the form of a baby. And even as we Christians may find ourselves struggling against the tsunami of materialism and consumerism that seems to wash out all meaning of the Christmas story, we also find ourselves struggling with texts like this from Mark. Every year, the first Sunday of Advent brings us to an apocalyptic text. Jesus is telling his disciples about the end times and it doesn't seem to have much bearing on the precious story of a baby in a manger we hold so dear. Instead, we get a prophecy of gloom and doom: “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” Where's the “Silent Night, Holy Night?” We hear that we “will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” And we might fill a bit on edge. Perhaps we question whether or not we will be in that “elect” or even if we're pretty confident we will be, we worry about loved ones who may not be. Is this the same little Lord Jesus who lay his sweet head in a manger while shepherds and barn animals adored him? Even as we wait for the glorious holiday of Christmas five weeks away, we are reminded that ultimately, we are waiting for that ultimate time when the Christ who was born into human form that Christmas morn over two thousand years ago will return to make all things new, to fulfill the promise God made to God's people ages and ages ago which continues to this day.

Years ago there was a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip in which Calvin declares, “Live for the moment is my motto. You never know how long you got. You could step into the road tomorrow and WHAM, you get hit by a cement truck! Then you'd be sorry you put off your pleasures. That's what I say—live for the moment.” Then he asks Hobbes, “What's your motto?” Hobbes replies, “My motto is—look down the road.” And that's what today's gospel lesson addresses—looking down the road to see what's ahead and being prepared for whatever may come.

Jesus tells us there are signs we can watch for to see what's coming down the road. We can read the signs just like the coming of summer. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Sometimes I worry. I hear the news of war and destruction, the suffering, the unsustainable toll we human beings are taking on the environment and I think that perhaps we are nearing the days when the sun will be darkened and the stars will fall out of the sky. And while I do yearn for God's making all things new, I don't look forward to the suffering that foretells it.

But these texts, much as they may be used and misused to scare us straight, to scare people into accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior or to scare us into doing right all so that we won't be subject to the suffering of the "not elect," these texts are actually intended to give us comfort. Notice, this text doesn't say that the elect will be free and clear from the suffering. Jesus says that the end times will come *after* the suffering, not preempt it. The life of a Christian—or anyone else for that matter—is not guaranteed to be easy. So where's the comfort? Where's the Good News? The Good News is that we do have one guarantee: that God will be with us. And that is Good News that bears reminding. The apocalyptic texts remind us not only that we need God with us, but that God indeed is, was and always will be with us, even as the birth of Jesus, Emanuel, reminds us the same. Emmanuel: God With Us.

Meanwhile we wait. We wait for Christmas Day and we wait for the Last Day. Advent is not only a season of preparation, it is a season of anticipation, of waiting. Spending time with my five year old nephew this Thanksgiving, I was reminded how very difficult it can be for young children to wait. And the more excited the child is, the more difficult it is to wait and the more relentless the child can be. "Can we go to the beach?" "Yes, we can go to the beach." "When can we go to the beach?" "After lunch." Five minutes pass. "Let's go to the beach now." "We'll go after lunch." Five minutes pass. "I wanna go to the beach." Repeat *ad nauseum*. And, of course, this scenario played out with more than just going to the beach. There was decorating Grammi's Christmas tree, getting a burrito, and going to the park, just to name a few. Repeat *ad nauseum*.

Perhaps the only way to deal with a situation like this is to distract the child to get his mind off of whatever it is he simply cannot wait to do. But Jesus says just the opposite. In today's passage Jesus tells us that no one, not even he, knows when the time will come. He says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." But rather than distract ourselves as we might a child, or pass the time in sleep, Jesus advises, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

So how do we keep awake? How do we prepare? Is it a spiritual matter or a matter of what we *do* as we wait? The answer is yes. It is both a spiritual and a practical matter. Jesus calls us to a life of spiritual alertness which can be pursued not only here on Sunday mornings but throughout the week in prayer, study and other spiritual disciplines. But we are also called to a life of alleviating the suffering of the world. We are called to be Christ's hands and feet in the world, assisting God in the act of making all things new. And in doing so, we will find ourselves alert and prepared for whatever may be coming down the road, whenever it may come.