

Keeping Awake

Mark 13:24-37

It may seem an **odd aspiration** for us these days,
this challenge of Jesus to *keep awake*.

I was reflecting on these words this week
while wide awake at 4:30 in the morning.

I had awakened at my usual 3:30,
about the time my natural rhythm brings me out of deep sleep,
when I usually toss and turn for about 20 minutes
until I find my way back into slumber.

But on this particular morning,
I had remembered suddenly about the tuition payment due that day
and that it needed to be done in the midst of all the other items on my to do list.

By 4:30, as sleep continued to elude me,
I got out of bed and started my day.

By 6:00, I still had some time before I needed to get going,
so I lay down on the couch and tried to catch a wink.

Again, lying there, this passage came to mind.

Keep awake, Jesus says to his disciples,
*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...*

Well, no worries here, Lord.

Sleep is not the problem. Or rather, it is the problem.

One pastor of a busy suburban congregation has suggested that

“with all there is to get ready for the holidays, secularly and sacredly,
nobody needs to tell **us** to ‘keep awake.’”

She suggests

“this may instead be the season to pass out the sleeping pills or the chamomile tea
to a revved-up, over caffeinated culture of busy-ness.”¹

Researchers inform us that

“sleep deprivation negatively impacts our mood, our ability to focus,
and our ability to access higher level cognitive functions...

Poor sleep is associated with higher stress levels
and a greater risk of heart disease and diabetes.”

and that

“sleep is the most underrated health habit,”²

But for all of our unhealthy wakefulness

and drivenness to accomplish all that is demanded of us,
we may still be missing the point of Jesus’ call to *keep awake*.

What exactly is he asking of us, anyway?

Our gospel reading on this First Sunday of Advent
is a strange one to our ears for many reasons.

It comes from the part of the Gospel of Mark known as
the **Little Apocalypse**,
in which Jesus calls his disciples to be faithful in the midst of the travail of the end times;
as in, **the end of all history**.

Sounding like an Old Testament prophet
Jesus tells us all the signs will accompany these times,
both cosmic and earthly.
It is not a time anyone wants to live through.
Things that seemed to be constant, like the sun, moon, and stars, will fail.
Heaven and earth will be in upheaval.

The community for whom Mark wrote his gospel would have been certain that, indeed,
they were the generation living in these end times.

In the year 70 AD, the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem,
and many Jews were either killed or forced to flee the holy city
never to return.

Jewish followers of Christ were included in this number,
and faced persecution both from the Romans and from their fellow Jews.
If not the whole planet, their whole world, at least,
was coming to an end.

In the midst of this upheaval, Jesus offers them a hopeful vision:
The one who perseveres
*will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory...
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.*

The disciples were to live in wakeful anticipation of his coming.
*When you see these things taking place,
you know that he is near, at the very gates...
Beware, keep alert;
for you do not know when the time will come.*

Reading this passage on the First Sunday of Advent gives us a little **liturgical whiplash**.
We have arrived at church ready to anticipate the coming of the Christ *child*,
as a baby, in the quiet of a starlit night,
and instead we have been hit full in the face with these troubling images
of the **second coming, rather than the first**.
But that is the point of the Season of Advent.
Remembering the First Coming,

we also live in anticipation of the time when God will bring to completion the work that began in the Incarnation.

How are we to live then in this anticipation?

What is our calling as disciples in our generation
when we look around at a world that is getting warmer every year,
and tempers that are heating up right along with it,
in part because the earth is getting more crowded,
and we in developed societies,
with limited resources to stay atop of the heap of humanity,
must scurry and scramble ever faster
to maintain our position and our quality of life.

What does it mean for us to heed Jesus' call to keep awake?

Well, for one thing,
while we may be wide awake physiologically,
staying awake spiritually is another matter.
And in fact, getting some rest — some sabbath from the constant scramble —
may be just the thing to help us disengage from the chaos
long enough to reengage with God
and to become reacquainted with the life that is really life.

Jesus calls us to spiritual wakefulness.

He calls us to an inner detachment
from the busy-ness, hurry, and noise that swirls around us,
so that we can remain grounded in the assurance
that God is still at work.

This assurance — that God is still at work —
provides a place for **hope** to grow,
hope that God has not abandoned the world to chaos,
but is **providing for us and for our salvation**
in the midst of the disorder.

The hope of the Advent season

is found in this assurance that there will come a time
when God will accomplish all that was promised
on that night the angels sang of “peace on earth, and goodwill to all.”

No longer will we have to trust in what we cannot see,
but **faith will become sight when the Son of Man appears.**

“In contrast to the Incarnation,
when the Savior comes in the helplessness of an infant,
and in contrast to the crucifixion,
in which the Savior suffered the humiliation of the cross,
this second coming is one of power and glory.
Descending from his throne at the right hand of God,

the Savior [will eliminate] any remaining doubts
about his identity or purpose.”³

The *keeping awake* Jesus call us to
has to do with **living with that end in mind**,
and working to align ourselves with what we know, in faith, to be true.
God wins.
Love wins.
Peace and good will win.

Jesus likens it to *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.

Each with his work.

You see, this is where the Second Coming and the First Coming meet.

Each with his work.

The Already and the Not Yet.

Each with his work.

The blessing that is yet to come made visible in the blessing that already is.

Each with his work.

This is how God’s blessed future breaks into our present.

Each with his work.

What is your work in this Season of Advent?

How will Christ come in your life in this season.

And through your Advent work,

how will Christ come in the lives of others?

Your work may be to **pause** each day from the scurry, light a candle, and pray.

Your work may be to **dig deep** into your soul,
find the seeds of hope planted by the gospel and water them.

Your work may be, oddly enough,
to get an extra hour of **sleep** each night,
as a sign of your trust that God will provide for you and your family.

Your work may be to **sing**,
or to **read**, or to deliver **meals**, or to **visit** the sick or the lonely.

To be sure, the works of Advent,
the waiting of servants for the master’s return,
is not the kind of thing that makes the headlines these days.
It’s not likely to get you on either CNN or Fox News,
and you can be thankful for that.

It is work that **matters** infinitely more.

It is work that lights a **candle** the the deep darkness.

So as we await the day
that *the Son of Man will gather his elect from the four winds,
from the ends of the earth and the ends of heaven,*
we gather together around this **wreath**,
and at this **table**,
and keep our souls awake to the good news we know:

*Love caused your incarnation, Love brought you down to me;
your thirst for my salvation, procured my liberty
O love beyond all telling, that led you to embrace
in love, all loves excelling, our lost and fallen race.*

To this love...

...and to these glad tidings,

...keep awake.

¹ Lillian Daniel, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 20.

² Studies cited by Arriana Huffington in *Thrive* (New York: Harmony, 2015) 74-75.

³ Rebecca Weaver, *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 20014) 416.