

He is Coming

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ "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. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you; this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

I must confess that I get confused. This is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the church calendar. I don't know if I should be preparing for Christmas, the celebration of the gift of God's son for the redemption of the world some 2,000 years ago; or should I be preparing for the Son of Man coming in the clouds, His second coming? What I do know is our scripture reading from Mark 13 admonishes us to "keep alert." This doesn't sound like sound like waiting for Christmas to me! What I do know is that most of us do not need to be told to "keep awake" during Advent. In normal years, when we are not in the midst of a global pandemic or in some personal crisis, we seem to be operating in a state of sleep deprivation. Nobody could accuse us of being asleep at the wheel. Rather, we might be accused of scurrying and overscheduling, running but getting nowhere, like a hamster on one of those wheels. As Advent begins, the fall season has swept

us through the "back to school season" of taking children to sports practices, choir rehearsals, and dance lessons. Many churches have aped the rhythm of the world, with programs now in full gear, from youth groups to adult studies and festive events. And now, suddenly, the rush of Advent.

With all there is to get ready for the holidays, secularly and sacredly, nobody needs to tell us to "keep awake." But let us be clear that while the world's busyness may seem to be pointed toward Christmas, it is seldom pointed toward the coming Christ. As Advent progresses, the number of shopping days left before the big day offers a countdown that stresses us out and keeps us up late. These days we are startled into extra hours of wakefulness. No wonder we tune it out, like teenagers hearing a parent's repetitive lecture and knowing that mom or dad simply does not understand.

But of course, God does understand. In this way, the Scripture from long ago reads us, not the other way around. In Advent, we are indeed asleep to much of what matters. Like people who have lived by the train tracks for years, we no longer hear the sound of the train. After years in church, we get used to the noise of Advent, to the coming of Christ, so much so that we no longer notice it. Or if we do, it has ceased to jolt us awake and has become instead a low, dull rumble.

As children, when we first learned of Advent, we anxiously awaited the Christmas pageant, and even the God it pointed to, the Son of Man coming in the clouds. But now tired parents might see that pageant as one more activity to drive the kids to, in a busy week, though we grandparents are always excited to see our grandchildren perform regardless of how busy we are. New members who have been away from church life return to the season of Advent with delight and wonder as they participate in the hanging of the greens and as the purple banners and Advent wreath appear. But after a few years, these signs of the season become mere decoration, and we forget their true meanings.

Like the house hunter who noticed the train tracks on moving day, but later sleeps through the whistles and the engines that rush by, we can miss the thing in the season of Advent that might have been most obvious and important at one time—the coming of Christ and the promise of His return.

We may not be physically asleep; quite the opposite. But in our wakefulness to worldly ways, we fall asleep to the spiritual season, and so we need a wake-up call from the Gospel of Mark. Mark, so quotes Jesus as telling of cosmic signs, of angels sent to gather God's elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven; of a man going on a journey and putting servants in charge and instructing them to work and watch; and what we can learn from fig trees about seasons.

It is a strange wake-up call for people who no longer hold fig trees as key metaphors in our cultural life. When we do encounter figs, they tend to be mashed inside that moist little comfort food cookie, or we might have a fig alongside a piece of fine cheese.

But as for the fig trees themselves, we do not see any on the carefully mowed lawns, or in blighted and neglected areas of our cities, or even in rural communities. If we do mow our lawns, rake our leaves, it is as a chore, often for appearance's sake. We do not normally find ourselves considering the branches of the fig tree and how they produce or do not produce fruit. Fruit production happens at the grocery store, when we take the food from shelf, to bag, to car trunk, to pantry; and then suddenly, on our granite countertops, fruit has been "produced."

Yet most of us long for a richer sense of how fruit comes into the world, with its rhythms of leaves and seasons. So, whether we walk in orchards or drive around the suburbs, or in rural communities, the image of the fig tree transports us to another world. There we imagine people who tend branches, not for the fun of it or to decorate a garden that decorates a house. We imagine a place where fruit trees

are tended to because they make a difference in our survival. We imagine a time when figs were a regular part of the diet and helped fill stomachs that might have been left empty, if someone had not faithfully tended those branches.

In a season that is gearing us up to shop, we consider what it would mean to stay away and engage the natural world, rather than the world of neon malls and sales. This life is precious and unpredictable. Its seasons are short. Let us not have it slip away, only to realize that we spent it shopping.

Jesus warns his listeners and us to "keep awake," because the time of the return of the master is unknown; it could be "in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn."

On the first Sunday of Advent, there is still time to wake up from our bad dream of consumerism and selfishness. There is still time to encounter instead the presence of Christ in our waking hours.

An agricultural, natural image pulls no punches. The seasons pass, and the fig tree's growth follows an order, but that fig tree is fragile itself. Some figs will not make it; they simply will not flourish. Staying awake matters, not so much to protect ourselves, but also to notice the beauty in the moment. By staying awake, we may catch the second when the branch is tender and learn that summer is near. By staying awake, we may be there to see the master, the Son of Man, who arrives when we are least expecting it, at midnight, at cockcrow, or at dawn. **Lillian Daniel**

In this Advent season we must watch and wait! As we move through the season, as we move closer to the coming of the Christ, the admonition to be alert once again cries out across time and space. Jesus reminds us now, as he reminded them then, that he will come again. We need not get lost in the details. Better to concentrate on being ready. **Judy Yates Siker**

Amidst the holiday parties, whether with those of your household or virtually; and late-night shopping trips, in person or via the Internet, the gospel reminds us to be awake to God in the world, and know that the Son of Man is coming. This is a way of being awake that might actually be restful and give us God's peace. **Lillian Daniel**

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