

## **KNOWING THE TIME WILL COME**

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

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Scripture: Habakkuk 2:1-3; Mark 13:24-37

At one end of the Brooklyn promenade, you can see a huge billboard hanging over the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. In the two and half years that I have lived in Brooklyn this billboard has displayed a variety of advertisements; at one time it displayed a large gecko watching the Manhattan skyline; at one time it was home to the popular Apple computer ad with a woman dancing in silhouette listening to her ipod. Now the billboard has a new Apple ad, with multiples of the new ipod model standing like a rainbow of dominoes. The intended audience for this billboard might be the drivers on the BQE, but its message also reaches the many tourists, neighbors and runners who frequent the promenade. The Brooklyn promenade is the home track for many runners. At all times of the day, from early morning to late in the evening, you can find runners there. My partner has made the promenade her treadmill as she rises daily, usually before the sun to clock her miles for the day.

I recently started running myself; having long been a biker and swimmer, running was a natural cross-training option. So two days a week, since early October, the alarm tolls for me at 5:30 am and instead of getting up to turn on the coffee pot and sit in my favorite living room chair and plan youth activities or prepare for Sunday morning Bible Study, I pull on my running shoes and head for the promenade. I start at the opposite end from the billboard, but along the way I find myself knowing that when I see the lights illuminating that advertisement, I've made it one more mile. I don't slow down to look at the billboard. I sometimes only see it out of the corner of my eye. I don't imagine any runner stops to see what advertisement it displays, but I have a feeling that this billboard is in exactly the kind of location where a vision for an appointed time, like the one mentioned in Habakkuk, could be written for runners to see it.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the season that marks the beginning of the church year. Advent is a season of waiting, a time of preparation for Christmas. Advent suggests patience and expectation. It is a season filled with the potential of seeing a new vision. Spiritual talk about Advent usually seeks ways to slow down, to pause in the hustle and bustle and see things from a new perspective. Christmas after all is a time of revelation, and how we see, how we perceive the world is an important part of our preparation.

The verses from Habakkuk describe a vision of anticipation, but it is not a vision we notice by slowing down; on the contrary, it is a vision that runs with us in the urgency of our lives. The vision is not meant to slow runners down, but to speed them up. The runners in Habakkuk were more likely military or diplomatic runners, conveying information from one party to another with their feet; so the vision of the appointed time is meant to urge them on, to inspire and to assure them and the people they are delivering messages to that God's plan is in place.

This advent our spiritual selves may be nourished most by thinking about how we encounter daily life in a way that gives us momentum. When we are swept up in the urgencies of each day, we are not as practiced at paying attention to why we are moving and what we are moving toward. When we are swept up in the urgencies of each day, we can easily get caught trying to keep one step ahead of fear instead of following hope.

Living in New York City, we encounter countless opportunities that inspire hope. Earlier this year I started keeping a list of things that caught my attention that seemed particular to living in this vibrant city. In a city this size and this diverse, it is almost impossible not to notice things that we have never seen before, even if it is important to not act surprised.

My list mostly includes idiosyncratic things like: seeing a man dressed up like a centaur walking across the Brooklyn Bridge on his own two hooves; passing a dog wearing a small canine sized bicycle helmet, riding in basket between the handlebars of his owner's bike, walking past people sitting in lawn chairs on the street corner in Brooklyn Heights who appeared to be counting pedestrians that walked by. As New Yorkers, these kinds of things barely cause us to turn our heads, let alone inspire hope, as we rush through our daily lives.

One particular event on my list did change the momentum of my day; it happened one morning at the West 4<sup>th</sup> street subway stop. I got off the local train and started walking toward the stairs at 8<sup>th</sup> street when an express train pulled up, blowing its horn. Now horn blowing by a subway usually means the train is about to speed right through the station, but on this morning the A train slowed to a stop and to my surprise the local train conductor responded with a horn blast. Before I knew it there was a friendly exchange of train whistles back and forth between the two subway trains. I had never experienced anything quite like that before on a subway platform, and I don't quite know why, but it struck me as especially joyful. For the rest of the day, I thought about those trains and their celebratory exchange.

So many events that happen in the typical movements of our day are pregnant with the possibility of hope. They are not the kinds of events that stop the motion of our day, but rather they are the events that keep us moving, that propel us to believe that there is a vision for the appointed time and to seek it with expectation.

It can be hard to keep our expectations free from fear. There is so much that can create fear and worry these days: job loss, planning for our children's well-being, financial struggles, violence in the world that threatens loved ones and our sense of security. We find our expectations packed with the kind of fear that keeps us up at night. So when we hear a passage like the one from Mark's gospel that we heard this morning, our fears get amplified and we think that we really ought to stay awake and watchful about all our worries. Mark's gospel sounds like a warning:

*'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. 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.'* (Mark 13:32-37, NRSV)

To untangle ourselves from the fear chasing our anticipation, we have to re-interpret both parts of the metaphor in this passage; we must examine the qualities of the "master of the house" and the work of those left in charge. We begin by imagining what will happen in this wakeful reunion with the keeper of the house. Would the keeper of the house we know return to punish us or celebrate with us? If this narrative is a metaphor for our relationship with God, we must recast the reunion this passage asks us to imagine. Our keeper, our God is comforting, reliable, and full of laughter and joy. If God comes in the evening, we can share dinner. If God comes at midnight, God can tell of the divine journeys before surrendering with us to the drowsiness of nighttime; if God comes at cockcrow, God can kiss our forehead and tuck the

comforter more tightly around us; if God comes at dawn, God can share a cup of coffee with us. Imagine staying awake for a God who brings joy in waiting, who we want to expect, who musters our anticipation!

In the other part of the metaphor, the work of preparation has never been quite as simple as staying awake. The first audiences of Mark's gospel were also living in a time when worries were many and fear was prevalent. Mark's gospel is masterfully written to increase hopeful anticipation in those unpredictable times. In our weekly Sunday morning Bible study, we examined the gospel of Mark for four weeks earlier this fall.<sup>1</sup> Scholars believe Mark was the first of the four gospels written, sometime in the mid-60's of the Common Era, before the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70. Several characteristics of the gospel are exemplified in this passage from Mark 13.

First, the action in Mark's gospel is all about urgency. I read a suggestion that one should read the gospel in its entirety standing up as a way to get a feel for the rapid activity of the narrative. Everything in Mark happens "immediately." Jesus transitions from place to place with insistent motion. The action moves quickly as does the narrative of Jesus' life in this gospel. There is no birth narrative, everything begins with Jesus' baptism and unfolds succinctly thereafter. It is no accident that Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four gospels, its characteristic urgency rushing the reader along its terrain.

The second notable characteristic of Mark's gospel is that the writers of Mark's gospel layer stories together in a way that highlights interruptions. One narrative begins and another interrupts it. A good example is when Jesus is walking to go and heal the daughter of a Roman soldier, a woman with a flow of blood reaches out and touches his cloak. He stops because he feels the power go out of him and searches for and finds the woman who touched him and heals her. By this time the girl who he was going to see has died, and the crowd believes the situation is now no longer important let alone urgent. They could not be more wrong. Jesus goes to the girl as well and heals her also. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus' ministry is filled with these kinds of examples where urgency and interruption intersect and collide.

The passage we heard today from Mark 13 is no exception. Here the urgency is in anticipation of an interruption, but this passage is reinforcing a concept that Jesus is acting on throughout his ministry. The necessity of watchfulness in this passage is teaching a way of preparedness. Jesus mirrors for all his followers how to live in a way of preparedness as we wait for the keeper's return. Jesus' actions show the complexity of life in momentum; his willingness to be interrupted remind his followers not that the work IS the interruptions, but that the work INCLUDES the interruptions and the urgencies that are being interrupted. Like the runners seeing the vision on the billboard, Jesus sees the vision and uses it to gain energy for all the work that needs to be done.

If our spiritual work during Advent is to keep our momentum and foster in that movement a sense of anticipation, a first step in our preparation is recognizing the urgencies and interruptions of our own lives are part of the work of nourishing the vision, not part of the problem. If we are aware of our momentum and allowing the interruptions to nourish us, we are well on our way to clearing a site-line for the vision. When we are honest, most of us would admit that the vision of the hope we seek has rarely been revealed to us where we would expect it. Our wishes are not granted in a magical way but in the revelations of ordinary life, brokenness and all. Kay Ryan, US Poet Laureate, describes well how this vision often comes to us in her poem called "Rubbing Lamps:"

Things besides  
Aladdin's and  
the golden cave  
fish's lamps  
grant wishes.  
In fact,  
most lamps  
aren't lamp-  
shaped and  
happen by  
accident: an  
ordinary knob  
goes lambent  
as you twist  
or a cloth turns  
to silver mesh  
against a dish --  
something  
so odd and  
filled with promise  
for a minute  
that you spend  
your only wish  
wishing someone else  
could see it.<sup>2</sup>

What fills us with promise is both that the vision emerges in ordinary events, and that the vision is strengthened further by our desire to share it. Advent is a relational season. Advent is not just about our individual preparedness and our individual spiritual disciplines; Advent is about our relational preparation. The runners do not see the vision written plain on tablets and then keep it to themselves; the vision for the appointed time is to be shared. Sharing the lamplight, sharing the interruptions and the daily routines are what prepare us for joy.

There is a vision for the appointed time, if it seems to tarry, wait for it, it will surely come. We do not wait alone for this vision, any more than we move alone in the momentum of our day. In the collision of our urgencies and interruptions we are called to share our expectation, to see our faith filled not with fear but with promise and hope. There is a vision for the appointed time, if it seems to tarry, wait for it, it will surely come.

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<sup>1</sup> Gooch, John. "Introduction to Mark." [www.thethoughtfulchristian.com](http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com), 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan, Kay. "Rubbing Lamps" in The Niagra River. (Grove Press: New York, 2005), p. 22-23.