

## **“STAY AWAKE”**

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

Sunday, December 3, 2017

Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9 and Mark 13: 24-37

Good morning! So here we find ourselves, the First Sunday in Advent. The start of the Christian year, the cycle begins today. And our colors, my favorite: purple. We only pull those out in our seasons of preparation, Advent and Lent.

We all know what's coming. The old and the young alike, those who are here every Sunday and those who come home to First Church once or twice a year, every three-year-old knows the story of the trek to Bethlehem and the baby in the manger.

Advent is the time we get ready. Nowadays, our day-to-day preparations this time of year aren't always, strictly speaking, of a spiritual nature. Everyone is scurrying about, buying presents, shopping, trying to buy Nutcracker tickets, planning a trip to the Rockefeller Center tree.

We know Advent is here right at the end of that Thanksgiving Day parade. Santa on the sleigh marking the parade's end is like crying out “open season,” as the Fifth Avenue storefront window lights are lit and we begin our frantic preparations, coordinations. In our family it seems more like military logistics: who arrives when, who sleeps with who. In our family I sometimes think the most inspiring Advent scripture would be the feeding of the 5,000.

And then there's Santa. Santa stays with us throughout our lives, really, although I think recently I've realized that our life's experience of Santa goes through four main stages, an evolution of sorts, as we go through life:

1. You are a believer in Santa.
2. You are not a believer in Santa.
3. You pretend to be Santa.
4. Then more and more, without even trying, it seems you start to look a lot like Santa.

Now I know you've heard many, many preachers from this historic pulpit over the years. I had a smile on my face yesterday morning as my mind wandered, and I thought . . . with all this good preaching that you've heard, that we take such pride in here at Old First, if it were in my power I would give you all honorary doctorates in preaching. You know there's the D.Min. degree, that's the Doctorate of Ministry. And the D.Div. degree, that's the abbreviation for the Doctorate of Divinity.

Well, why not? Here you go . . . By the power vested in me (which by the way is none) I grant to each one of you the esteemed Doctorate, the Honorary Homily award. That's abbreviated to the Ho Hum degree – which is exactly the reaction you'll get to it, and maybe too what that Ho Hum degree is worth.

So, my respected Honorary Doctorates, you all know that a lot of preachers like to give some organization to their sermons. Some of them, every single time, just make three points, they hold fast to that mantra. And they make sure everyone knows there are exactly three points. Maybe it helps people remember a little bit of something in the sermon as mimosas are sipped at brunch. Or at least it serves as a kind of countdown for those whose eyes are on the clock till coffee hour.

So let's try it this First Sunday in Advent. With those crazy verses from Mark's gospel about the sun being darkened, and the stars falling from heaven, and keeping alert since we don't know when the Son of Man

will arrive with great power and glory. Let's see . . . Three themes for this morning's journey through scripture.

With that language from Mark, the first point has got to be about Apocalypse, the End Times, God's return. As crazy as that seems for an Advent sermon. Maybe the second theme for today's verses should be Ethics. Now what preacher worth his Geneva Tabs would skip that topic with all that's going on in the news these recent days, where it seems more like we're travelers through an ethical desert.

So we have End Times. We have Ethics. And the third theme, you'll be relieved to hear, as we enter into Advent, into this holy season, this holiday season, the third theme from today's verses maybe should be Joy.

End Times. Ethics. Joy.

When earlier this week, Jon asked me to preach, as usual, I pulled out the common lectionary to see what were the scriptures being used in today's services around the world. Listen again:

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

This is Jesus talking here. Then he tells the story of the master who goes away, with his servants in charge, commanding them to be on watch because they don't know when the master will return. Jesus ends by saying, "What I say to you, I say to all: keep awake."

Why in God's name would they pick those verses about the second coming, about the end times, for this First Sunday in Advent?

I think back to what it must have been like 2,000 years ago. For generations, God's faithful were waiting. They were expecting a messiah, a savior to change the world, to overthrow oppression, to bring righteousness to the world. The Old Testament scriptures told them what to expect, what they should be prepared for. The Prince of peace. Immanuel – God as human.

Sort of like the story of being alert from our scriptures from today, everyone had to stand ready, everyone must stay awake, for no one knows when the messiah would come. Well, I'm thinking that 2,000 years ago, no one was prepared for the impact of this messiah. The One who has had more impact on our world than any other person in human history. No one was standing at the ready, staying awake, expecting a baby born into poverty, without even a bed, lying in a manger.

There are some brands of Christians who think they are standing ready, that they are staying awake. They look for the second coming of the messiah; they long for the day of rapture. Focused on their own holiness and their certain salvation, looking only to the world to come, rather than focusing on the impact of their actions in the world of the here and now.

Today's scriptures from Mark are a little difficult for those of us whose focus on the present, and making a difference in the world in the name of the One. We don't so much look to the signs of the end times -- the total eclipse of the sun, or earthquakes, or devastating hurricanes. And yet our gospel this First Sunday in Advent tells us to stay awake. How do we connect these verses to the way we live out the calling of our progressive faith?

Well, even though we do not, as rule, place ourselves among those literal apocalyptics, there is something we can learn. I'm always thrilled at the depth of our faith, the meanings hidden deep down in the complexity of what seems so simple and clear on the surface. No, our faith, our God, is far greater.

Really, these apocalyptic verses are talking more about being on the right side of our God, being active and vigilant in the practice of our faith, living out the values of the One we claim as our guide. That's why we boldly say that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Those are the values that, at least we claim, are the values that guide our lives. Living in ways that show how we put our faith into practice, how we live out our faith, our faithfulness to Christ.

If the end is coming, whether with trumpets and angels, or global warming and nuclear annihilation, what will we be doing? Will we stay awake? Will we let the troubles of our world bring us into darkness, and tempt us to compromise our values? Or will we continue, with hope, to live out the character of our God? Our God of love. We can't just plod through, throw in the towel, weary at the evils that surround us. But we need to stay awake, stay alert, true to our values, true to our faith, true to that which we call our Lord.

Because it is Advent. He is coming! Get ready!

I need to tell a personal story I remember every time I hear the phrase "Stay Awake." When I was a kid, maybe 4 or 5 years old, my mom brought me to Radio City Music Hall one Saturday. I can still remember how the show went on all day long, continuously from like 10am until 10pm, alternating between a just-opened movie on a screen that filled that entire gigantic stage, alternating with a live Rockettes stage show. And you could stay and see the movie again, or the show again. Really you could come anytime during the day and just stay until you met up with the place where you started.

Well I remember my mom brought me to see "Mary Poppins" with Julie Andrews singing that lullaby "Stay Awake" that always did just the opposite, putting every kid under the age of 10 to sleep before the song's final note. Sometimes telling someone to stay awake just has the opposite effect, lulling us into boredom and complacency. Anyway, I convinced my mom to let me stay through four showings of Mary Poppins that day. I think she just found a way on a rainy Saturday to keep a five year old entertained.

You know, there's another aspect to being prepared too, to staying awake. Which brings us to my second theme: Ethics. In this time of fallen ethics, of behavior by people who for too long just get away with it: news of falsehoods, horror stories of abuse, of misconduct, of greed. It's important to remember that ethical behavior is really what you do when no one is looking. To be your best self when the spotlight is not on you. To stay awake even when the master is away.

We followed that same principle at our management firm. Even in that heady world of detailed rules and fine lines, we would say at our weekly staff meetings that the question you should always ask yourself is: What is the underlying purpose, the underlying truth of any rule? Follow that, and you won't get near any fine line. And take a moment to think of what your actions would look like if they were on the front page of the New York Times, or you had to explain to your kids (or to your grandmother) exactly what it was that you were doing.

Staying awake means living out our values every moment of every day. Living the lives as our gracious God intends. Keeping community with those who love mercy and walk humbly, who strive with every step to reflect justice. Identifying with, standing up for, the poor, the foreigner, the oppressed.

These times require us to stay awake. It's easy, by hearing the same lullaby of lies over and over, to begin to think that maybe wrong might be right. To give in just because we're too weary to argue. It can be overwhelming, especially in these challenging times. Advent is about staying awake, staying alert, for the One we know is coming. It's just around the corner now!

We've heard it so many times we forget where it comes from, but it's a quote attributed to theologian Karl Barth, about the approach that pastors should take to preaching. Really his approach that we Christians should take to all of life. Namely, that we should approach life with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In our brand of theology, our faith is shallow and lacks meaning if we can't relate our faith to our world. But there's a nuance that is often lost in the simplification of that Bible and newspaper metaphor. Hear Barth's own words:

"The pastor and the faithful should not deceive themselves into thinking that they are just a religious society which has to do with certain academic themes; no, they live in the world. . . . Reading the newspaper is urgently recommended for understanding the Epistle to the Romans, for example. Take your Bible and your newspaper and read both, but interpret newspapers from your Bible. . . .

A theologian should never be formed by the world around him, but rather make his vocation to show that the two can live without a clash. Where the peace of God is proclaimed, peace on earth is implicated. Let us never forget that Christmas message."<sup>1</sup>

So Advent is about Ethics too. Staying awake, being prepared, examining our faith and seeing how it intersects with the world. Acting, always, in line with our values, in line with all those things about Jesus we learned in Sunday School, in line with the teachings and the life example of the One we follow. Even when no one is watching. Even when we think the master is away. In everything we do, doing all for the glory of God. Really, that's what being a Christian is all about.

Not all that long ago, an eighth grader in communicants' class was concerned about whether or not she should become a member. "I'm not sure I believe everything we're talking about in class," she hesitatingly admitted. "Well, I'm not sure I do either," I replied. "But you're a minister," she exclaimed in amazement. So I asked her three questions.

"Do you believe there is some greater force in the universe, call it God, call it some collective consciousness, call it The Force from Star Wars, whatever?" She said yeah, that made sense.

"And do you believe after we die that our souls, the essence of who we are, lives on; that there is some continuity of existence, even if we don't know exactly what that might be like?" She said yes to that one too.

"And what about all the things you've learned, the values that you learned about Jesus, the things he said, the things he stood for? Like loving your neighbor as yourself, and helping those who are less fortunate, and being true to what you believe. Do you think that the lessons of Jesus are ones that you agree with?" Yes.

"Well," I offered, "I think maybe you're closer to being a Christian than 98 percent of people out there!"

That's that kind of church we are, the kind of Christians we are. We're all on a spiritual journey, a quest for answers, where questions are the key to understanding and faith. And perhaps the most important one is how our values, how our faith, is put into practice in our daily lives.

So in these times of troubled waters, staying awake, staying alert, preparing ourselves spiritually for the coming of the Prince of Peace, may have even more implications for us as Christians. What are we, you and me, what are each one of us called to be, called to do? How are we called to act, to reflect the light of the One who comes in love, as we live in the grace of the One from whom all our joy flows?

We can't ever forget that joy is at the center of our faith. Advent is about anticipation. With the uncontrollable hopes and dreams of a five year old, as Christmas Day approaches, Advent is about joy.

Yes, there are some Christians who are all about doom and gloom. And we Presbyterians, we Calvinists, have often been thrown into that same pot, with our confusing concepts of total sinfulness and predestination. But our God is a God of hope. And even those dark Calvinist thoughts at their core point to the unrelenting forgiveness, the total and complete generosity, the ever-flowing grace, of a God who loves us no matter what. Who loves us enough to come and live as one of us, to show us that God is the one who will always win, to remind us time and again that nothing can separate us from God's love.

The joy we feel at the story of Christmas is not just our reaction to a feel-good fantasy, a magical myth designed to evoke emotion. No, we as Christians look to Christmas with a deeper joy. God is love. God is with us. And God gives us each other in community to sustain us through every trial.

So give into the joy of Advent, of Christmas. Christmas happened for you!

Now before we head outside today into that crazy world of bright lights and big city, I want to leave you with a funny story about preparing for the unexpected. It seems a wife arrives home late at night from a business trip, and quietly opens the door to her bedroom. But instead of seeing just the two legs of her husband, she notices four legs peeking from under the blanket!

Seized by a fit of rage, at the top of her lungs she screams at the blanket with just the four feet sticking out. "You two are the most evil, most wretched, most disgusting people I can imagine. I knew you were trouble the first time I met you." And she slammed the door and stormed out. Still in shock, she stumbles down to the kitchen to have a drink.

As she enters, she sees there, reading a magazine, her husband. "Oh welcome home darling," he says, "my parents came for a visit, so I let them have our bedroom. I hope you said hello."

Welcome to Advent. May it bring you abundant joy.

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, <http://barth.ptsem.edu/about-cbs/faq>.