

Sermon – Keep Awake  
Scripture Readings – Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37  
Sunday, November 30, 2014  
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Our first scripture reading, Isaiah chapter 64 verses 1 through 9, comes at a turning point in Israel's history. Persia has defeated Babylon, and the Persian king, being sympathetic to the people of Israel, has ended their exile and allowed them to return home to Judea, Jerusalem, and the site of the destroyed temple. They are free, yet the pain and suffering of exile are still very present. The people of Israel feel as though God long ago turned away from them in punishment, but their faith in God moves them to call out regardless, and to trust that they belong to God still.

Here now God's holy Word.

*1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! 3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. 5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. 6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. 8 Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark chapter 13, verses 24 through 37. Jesus is near the end of his life and knows it, and so embarks on a final attempt at teaching his disciples about what is coming next. He foretells the destruction of the Temple and dark times of suffering and false messiahs. And then he gives a message of hope and good news, of a vision of a radically changed world.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

*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."*

This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: Keep Awake

*The text: "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." Mark 13:33*

Let us pray: Living God, through long generations you prepared a way for the coming of your Son, and by your Spirit you still bring light to illumine our paths. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Happy First Week of Advent! In keeping with my previous sermons, I'm beginning with a warning for you—I love Advent. I *really* love Advent. I'm sure it has something to do with being raised by two liturgically conscious pastors: Advent was about Advent—the waiting. Christmas belonged solely to its twelve days. We got our tree in the fourth week of Advent, didn't play Christmas music until Christmas Eve, and decorated our house minimally, in nothing but candles and purple, through the month of December. But beyond any liturgical or theological reason, I think I love Advent because I have a personality that loves the excitement of anticipation. I was the kind of child whose favorite part of my birthday parties was the half hour before the first guest arrived. And Advent is an entire four weeks of that kind of excited waiting.

I love Advent! I love the fact that this excitement of anticipation pairs with a sense of quiet and simplicity, of nothing but candles and purple. It is a holy time that perfectly suits me. And I tell you this to demonstrate just how out of character it's going to be when I start talking about Santa in a couple minutes.

But before Santa, it's time for Fun With Languages!

The word Advent comes from the Latin noun *adventus*. It means, quite simply, *arrival*. Thus, the season that begins this week is looking to the arrival of Christ, which is why we kick off Advent with this passage from Mark.

This passage sets the stage for the coming season, for Advent, because it talks about the *parousia* (we're switching from Latin to Greek, now). *Parousia* is a Greek noun which means *advent*. Now doesn't that clear everything up?

*Parousia* means advent, yes—but it is also the theological term for the return of Christ, the Second Coming. It literally means presence, coming, or arrival, and was used technically to mean the arrival of the right person at the right time, or the royal visit of the king or emperor.

So we start to see why *parousia* has been used by Christians to describe the return of Christ.

Now Mark doesn't actually use the word *parousia* in this passage, nor its verb form. Instead, he uses a quieter, more common word for "to come"—but one which also means "to return". So when Jesus says "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds"—we can also read that as "the Son of Man *returning*". Again, this points to the *parousia*—the return of Christ, not simply the initial arrival of an unknown Son of Man.

So Mark uses this dual-purpose verb to describe the coming of the Son of Man, but he uses a quieter and more general word than *parousia*, which, remember, refers specifically to a royal visit, or the arrival of the right person at the exact right time.

His verb might be quieter, but his description of the *parousia* is hardly quiet at all. The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in heaven will be shaken. Heaven and Earth will pass away. This vision of the *parousia* is a complete and radical reimagining of the order of the world. This is an event that would be hard to miss, and difficult to sleep through. Yet Jesus warns us to keep awake—to stay alert, to be ready and careful and watchful; because no one—not even Jesus himself!—knows when this *parousia*, this coming of the right person at the right time, will happen.

We begin Advent with this vision of the *parousia*, a vision Jesus told his disciples not long before his arrest and execution, this warning from Jesus to stay awake, to keep watch, to be alert to signs of this spectacular event. But this passage is so closely associated with modern day apocalypticism—with modern day notions such as the Rapture and the Left Behind and all their accompanying fear and terror—that it's hard to hear it as the early church did, and as the disciples must have.

Because this complete and radical reimagining of the world's order is not meant to be a time to fear, or a time of suffering—instead, Jesus tells us, this will come *after* suffering, a suffering he describes in detail in the passages preceding the one we read today, a suffering created and perpetrated by humans, not by God—a suffering born of war, violence, and injustice.

So I sat with this passage all week, trying to strip away my modern associations, trying to hear it as Jesus seems to have meant it—as good news! As the joyous overthrowing of a corrupt world order, as a time for which we all long and which we anticipate with excitement and delight---

--And I realized that this description of the *parousia* reminds me of nothing so much as Santa Claus. Or rather, of our experience of Santa as children.

Like I said, I love Advent—I never thought I would ever be talking about Santa from the pulpit. But now that I am, I'm going to roll with it. Our experience of Santa is perhaps our first and best understanding of how we should respond to the *parousia*.

Santa's timing is inexplicable and beyond reason; impossible to pin down and truly unknown in its workings. And yet we trust it entirely. We spend a season of waiting, of longing, of eager anticipation and delighted excitement, hope battling doubt, struggling with the fear that perhaps this time our expectations will not be met, yet still deeply assured of the ultimate fulfillment of this expectation.

Inexplicable, unknown timing; painful longing; hope and doubt together; excited anticipation; expected ultimate fulfillment—this is the *parousia* as Mark describes it.

And so we see that it is, in fact, children who have exactly the right impulse when it comes to the *parousia*—Keep Awake!

Who hasn't tried their hardest to stay awake all night in order to be present for that exact moment when Santa appeared? Who didn't wake up hours earlier than any other day in order to see if expectations had been fulfilled?

Keep Awake! Every child (and with them, every parent!) knows this is the proper response to the advent of Santa.

And this is how Jesus tells us to respond to the *parousia*: with an excitement that cannot be contained, with a joy that will not let us sleep—Keep Awake!

And if it's been a long time since Santa visited you, there's another, more scholarly-acceptable parable for the *parousia*: waiting the arrival of one whom you deeply love.

In fact, in biblical accounts of the *parousia* Christ is often compared to a bridegroom. We are waiting for our beloved, desperate, anxious, full of the pain of separation, but thrilled with the hopes and thoughts of the future and a time of a reconciliation and reunion that will not pass away.

And it is this that Isaiah is talking about in our first reading. Today's passage is from the final third of the Book of Isaiah, written just after the end of the exile in Babylon and the return to Jerusalem. The people of Israel, newly released and returned home, call out to the beloved God they felt had left them during their time in exile: "You are ours and we are yours; you have shaped us and continue to shape us; we remember you, we know you, and we will recognize you when you return."

This coming, this returning, this *parousia*, is exciting and overwhelming, and the timing is inexplicable and unknown: but there are signs, also, Jesus says, ways we will know what it is to be in the presence of Christ—just as the people of Israel remembered what it was to be in the presence of God. They remember the mighty deeds, the fire and the quaking mountains—and so they comfort themselves with the knowledge that they will know God when God returns to them. And so Jesus assures us that we WILL see the signs of this *parousia*, this time of arrival: that we WILL know Christ again—that we WILL recognize our beloved.

And so we have this holy time, where quiet and simplicity meet an overwhelming excitement, for this is the season of Advent:

- a time of waiting for the *parousia*
- of lighting candles to mark our waiting
- of telling again the stories of the signs of Jesus' arrival—of the words of John the Baptist, of a young woman singing hymns of praise, of messages from angels

For the incarnation happened in the most unexpected of ways—not with quaking mountains or darkened skies, but with the quiet of an unexpected baby, in an unexpected place and time

No one knows the time or place, but we are assured of the *parousia*, of this good news of the radical transformation of our world, of the return of the One whom we love. We are waiting with the delighted excitement of children, we are longing with the joy of those in love: so Keep Awake! Jesus has surprised us before, so Keep Awake! Watch the world for signs of Christ; look for the face of our beloved in the faces of all we meet: listen for the songs of messengers throughout the world: Keep Awake!

Watch the fireplace, watch the door: the bridegroom approaches! Keep Awake!