

Advent 1

November 29, 2020

Stay Awake – Be Alert!

Mark 13:24-37

We've just heard the concluding verses of the passion story. No, it's not the passion of Christ, the account of his suffering and death that's often read from one of the gospels toward the end of Lent, shortly before Easter. Now, as we begin the season of Advent and start looking toward Christmas, we have the passion of the world, and the passion of God's people in the world.

Making that connection might seem at first like a bit of a stretch. But let's look carefully at our text and the way it's placed in Mark's gospel.

The story is set at the point when Jesus leaves the temple where he has been debating with and criticizing the religious authorities, just a few days before his passion.

When the disciple's comment on the grandeur of the temple, Jesus tells them that it's going to be destroyed. They ask when that will happen, and instead of giving a direct answer, Jesus tells about a coming time of troubles for the world.

There will be wars, natural disasters, persecution and false prophets. And as the world seems to be coming apart, people will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory" to gather his elect.

Our text is the end of this discourse about the future in chapter 13 of Mark. Here Jesus tells us what he wants us to be doing during this time. In these concluding words, he emphasizes what is really important for us to know.

What is that? With all the bad things that were to come, maybe the key word would be "hide." Find some secure place and wait it out. Some Christians have done that, going into the desert to be hermits or founding strict religious communities to avoid contamination by a sinful world.

Or perhaps the word would be "calculate." Maybe those who are clever enough can find

clues in the Bible and work out when the world will end.

But Jesus doesn't tell us to calculate. In verse 32, he said that even he didn't know when the end would come. And he doesn't want his followers to escape from the real world. For all the coming troubles, it is, after all, God's world.

The key phrase in these concluding verses is "Stay awake." An older translation says "Watch." The Greek could mean both of those, or perhaps "Keep alert." Someone who is "on watch," like a sailor on a naval vessel or a security guard for a business, has to be awake and alert to signs of danger and ready to spring into action. Watching is not just a matter of passively observing things.

In Mark's next chapter, Jesus will also tell some disciples to "stay awake" or "watch." That happens when they come to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus is going to pray in the face of the suffering and death that he fears in a very human way. This is part of the passion narrative — chapters 14 and 15 of Mark, which are often read in churches during Holy Week.

In some of the ancient church lectionaries, our chapter 13 is assigned to be read along with the two following chapters. Christians long ago saw that the passion of the world and of the Christian community is connected with the passion of the Lord.

And with regard to both of them, Christians are called to stay awake, to be alert and to watch. To illustrate his point, Jesus tells a little parable about the master of a large household who goes on a journey.

We might recast this story in more modern terms. When the head of a large enterprise goes on a business trip, she'll have an assistant whom she can notify when she's about to return so things can be ready for a meeting. That assistant has to stay alert. He has to check his emails and can't just silence his phone and take a nap.

But that's not all. There are all the other employees who have to continue to do their

jobs. They have to be awake and alert to do those jobs, and be aware that the boss will return and expect to find out what they've accomplished. Not everyone is to be a doorkeeper.

If they all spent their time checking to see if the boss was on the way back to the head office, the business wouldn't do very well!

Jesus' final words in our text are, "What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." The message is for us. We are to be awake and alert now, in this time between Jesus' departure and the end of history, when God's purpose for creation will be fulfilled. What does that mean in practical terms?

Watching is more than just trying to see if Jesus is coming. It's clear from a number of scripture texts that he will come without warning. Watching means first to try to discern what God is doing in the world. There are religious, social and political movements whose participants think they're furthering God's purposes by their activities. Not all of them are. We only have to consider the extreme example of people who think it's the will of God to kill those who don't agree with them! But even those whose language and actions seem more benign may not get it right.

Our pointer to the way God works — indeed, to who God *is* — is the life of Jesus Christ, a life that took him with some inevitability to his passion, death and resurrection. That is not a common-sense view of God.

Watchers need to be alert to false prophets, one of the signs Jesus mentions. There are, for example, those who tell us that nothing really bad, like nuclear war or environmental disaster from climate change, can happen because God promises to preserve creation.

Well, God will keep his promises, but not necessarily in the way we expect or want. Six centuries before Christ, prophets like Jeremiah were warning the rulers of Jerusalem that disaster was coming if they didn't change their policies, but the false prophets assured them that God wouldn't let anything bad happen. They were wrong. Their city and

temple, their whole political and religious order were destroyed by the Babylonian armies. God did fulfill his promises, but that was accomplished only by bringing a remnant of the people of Israel through that disaster and two generations in exile.

Watching does not mean spending 24 hours a day, seven days a week, looking upward in expectation. St. Paul's often quoted (and often misinterpreted) statement that "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" probably refers, as the context indicates, to those who thought that since Christ would return soon, they didn't need to work for their food and were sponging off others.

In Jesus' closing parable, there is not only the doorkeeper whose task is to watch for the master's return; there are also all the other servants who are given tasks.

They are supposed to concern themselves with those tasks until the master returns. They represent the great majority of Christians, who are to do the jobs we're called to in the world — jobs which, for most of us, are not explicitly "religious." Nurses, construction workers, scientists, police officers, parents and others who do lawful work on land or sea, in the air or in space, are not just earning a living but are serving God and neighbor in various ways.

Despite all the world's troubles, it isn't going to hell. Almost the opposite is true. The world isn't "going to heaven," but the image toward the end of the book of Revelation is of a renewed creation, and the heavenly city coming down to the new earth. And "the glory and honor of the nations" — all the good that has been accomplished during its history — will be brought into it. We can all be awake and alert for opportunities to contribute our efforts, time and money to organizations and movements that work for justice, peace and the welfare of creation.

"What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."