

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 13:24-37 (NRSV)

"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."

POINTLESS WAITING

"'Tis the season to be jolly?" I'm not so sure. I think we should change it to "'tis the season to be waiting." In a town made famous by its lines and long waits we now come to the season when waiting becomes an art form.

Do you want to eat at a nice restaurant? You'll have a table in only 40 minutes. Need to do a little Christmas shopping? Try to avoid Wal-Mart.

You'll be in line forever. I must admit that I hate waiting. It seems like such an unproductive use of time. And yet waiting is such a big part of our lives.

You can spend your entire life waiting for something to happen.

A little boy could not wait to get to high school. The high school kids seemed to have so much fun. Once he got to high school however, he noticed that the people, like his sister, who had gone off to college were having more fun than he was. He could not wait to get to college. But college seemed to drag on after a time and he was tired of all the homework.

He couldn't wait to get out of school, get a job and make some money. When he got his first job, it seemed as though people who were really happy were the ones with a wife or husband, a couple of children and a home with a back yard – maybe even a family dog.

But once he was married and had two children and a mortgage and a dog, he envied those couples whose children had gone away to college. They had so much more time for each other.

Finally his children had left for college. But now the burden of a mortgage and tuition for two children was very heavy and he couldn't wait to be out of debt, pay off his house and retire. Then he could have some real fun like all those people who move to Arizona and play golf every day.

Then one day – in the early winter of his life – standing at the tee of the 18th hole of the golf course near his home in Phoenix – (still unable to straighten out the horrible slice that had plagued him ever since he retired) – he thought to himself,

"What's the point?"

We too can wind up missing the point if we wait on the wrong things. We can come to the end of our life and find that it all seems meaningless. To paraphrase that pessimistic preacher of Ecclesiastes, "The sun goes up and the sun goes down, but nothing ever changes."

Does that describe you? Are you marking time instead of really living?

WAITING ON THE LORD

Perhaps you are waiting on the wrong thing. The Bible tells us that “those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

I think the converse of that verse is true as well. “Those who wait *without* the Lord shall wear themselves out!” It’s not the waiting that gets us. It’s waiting for something that has no meaning. Life must have a purpose.

What is the purpose of your life? Are you waiting for the Lord or are you just waiting? I really believe that each of us has a God shaped hole in our heart that only the Divine can fill. Just as Israel longed for a Messiah, we long for God to come into our hearts.

But, we do not understand the longing in our hearts. Like the story of the man who spent his life waiting to be somewhere else, we foolishly believe that the next life change will bring fulfillment. But, it doesn’t. Sometimes the anticipation is greater than the event itself.

A FALSE HOPE

That’s especially true when it comes to the Christmas season. Every year it’s the same story. There’s a mad dash the day after Thanksgiving as an orgy of feasting and shopping begins.

We may say that we’re celebrating the incarnation. But, what we’re really doing is celebrating the culture. We are caught up by the Christmas rush.

In a way, we are asleep, asleep to the real meaning of Christmas. Today's lesson is a wakeup call for those of us who are waiting in line at Wal-Mart but not watching for the coming of the Messiah.

It helps us focus on a lasting hope instead of a false hope.

The 13th chapter of the book of Mark begins with Jesus and his disciples discussing the glory of the temple in Jerusalem. The disciples are impressed with this man-made structure. And it was very impressive. It took several generations to build and stood gleaming in the mid-day sun.

But, Jesus said that the temple in all its glory was just a pale reflection of the real thing. Jesus said, "In the not too distant future, this temple will be destroyed." The disciples wanted to know when this would happen. In their minds if the temple were destroyed the world would be coming to an end.

Jesus said in effect,

"Don't worry about it.

The temple will be destroyed, all kinds of religious crackpots will predict the end of the world and all kinds of cataclysmic natural disasters will take place all over the world.

But these strange events will not necessarily mean that the world is coming to an end. No one knows when that time will come so it does you no good to speculate.

Instead of waiting for something that may or may not happen, you need to be preparing for something that surely will happen one day, the return of the Lord in glory."

A DOOR THAT LEADS TO THE CROSS

A commentator said that the 13th chapter of Mark is the doorway to the road that leads to the cross. It is yet another way of predicting the passion of Christ. That's why Jesus told his disciples, "This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

When we studied this passage at our Bible study this past week someone said, "That verse has always troubled me. It seems as if Jesus were expecting the end of the world to come shortly."

She was right. It does seem that way. And perhaps the end of the world as we know it did come to pass in just a few short days after Jesus spoke these words.

Do you remember the things that happened when Jesus was crucified? The world turned dark. The sun was darkened. All of nature seemed to be changed by what happened that day.

Verses 35-36 of our lesson for today reads,
"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."

Does that remind you of some things that will soon happen in the story of Jesus?

The disciples slept instead of keeping watch with Jesus in the Garden at midnight. The disciples ran away and Peter betrayed his Lord at cockcrow. And the women were amazed at dawn when they found the tomb empty.

The disciples could not keep watch. They were never awake to the presence and message of the Messiah. They were always impressed with the glitz of powerful religious institutions like the temple or the raw power of military might.

They never really thought that God could come in the way that he came. And so they were always misunderstanding and misinterpreting the words and actions of Jesus.

KEEPING WATCH TODAY

We are exactly like those disciples of old. We still insist on waiting for our own kingdom instead of watching for the kingdom that Jesus brings. We look for a kingdom based upon power and glitz. The excesses of the Christmas season betray what we really believe.

But, as we mentioned last week, the presence of Jesus still comes to us where we least expect it. The presence of Jesus still comes to us in the lives of those who need the most help, the “little ones” that are often overlooked.

We must do more than just wait. We must watch. We must live life on tiptoe, always straining to hear the sound of angel wings, always looking for that special star in the East, and always seeking to find the presence of God in a manger.

The great preacher, Fred Craddock wrote, “Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming because deep down they are disappointed with the first one.”

I think that’s true. We can turn the Jesus of the second coming into a military Messiah who swats our enemies like so many flies. We can become so obsessed with the glory of the second coming that we can forget about all those passages where Jesus talks about our moral responsibilities.

Are we uncomfortable with the Jesus who hung out with shady businessmen and prostitutes because they were the ones who needed a physician? Are we uncomfortable with the Jesus who touched the “untouchables” and dreamed of a time when people of all nations would join together at the same thanksgiving feast? Are we uncomfortable with a Jesus who comes not just

to save our soul or our country but the whole world? The answer to our discomfort is easy.

Place all your emphasis on the coming Messiah and the Jesus who has already come will become a person relegated to the past.

SPIRITUAL AWARENESS

Trouble is Jesus won't let us do that. Jesus told his disciples then and now, "Keep awake." And He meant that we need to be awake spiritually. He challenges us to cultivate a spiritual awareness that allows us to see the present world through the eyes of faith. We see the present world through the eyes of Jesus.

When I was a youngster, my family and friends teased me about being a bit ungainly. Since I was left-handed I looked a bit awkward when I attempted to do common tasks. My first grade teacher even tried to get me to write with the right hand because my attempts at writing looked so strained.

I began to accept the fact that this was who I was, a big ungainly guy with size 13 shoes. That's why I was terrified by the prospect of taking dance lessons last year. Suppose I stepped on someone's toes? Suppose I wasn't coordinated enough to learn the steps?

But, over time I became aware of things that had escaped me all my life. Coordination and balance are not just God given traits. They can be cultivated by careful attention to detail. A person can learn to be aware of where their feet and body are positioned. Practice can lead to a whole new world and a whole new way of looking at yourself.

You can learn to be a graceful person.

I think it is the same way when it comes to spiritual awareness. It does not come naturally. We must learn to do it. We must cultivate spiritual sensitivity by paying attention to the details of life.

Every day we must go beyond just waiting for the next thing to happen. We must keep watch. We must be alert. We must be awake to the possibilities.

We must (as one church father put it) practice the presence of Christ.

And as we do that, a life filled with emptiness is filled with grace and hope. We become graceful by paying attention to the details of life.

Jesus will come again one day and all things will be reconciled to God. But, as we wait for that future coming we must stay awake in the present moment.

We must learn that each and every day can be a “little advent” in which the Lord comes to us in a new way.

Every day can be a time to discover anew the love, compassion, justice and peace of Jesus.

FILLING OURSELVES WITH THE RIGHT THINGS

It all depends upon filling your life with the right things.

We know all about filling ourselves with the wrong things don't we? What happened when you filled yourself with turkey and dressing this past Thanksgiving? That's right. You fell asleep as yet another team beat the Detroit Lions football team on TV.

I guess it's appropriate that we begin the Christmas season by stuffing ourselves until we fall asleep. It is symbolic of the problem. We lull ourselves to sleep by buying too much, eating too much and entertaining too much.

It's just the opposite of how Jesus would have us prepare for his coming.

The Advent/Christmas season is a season of hope, but it does not begin with hope. It begins with hopelessness. It begins with a people who are longing for salvation. It begins with a people who have lost everything and don't know where to turn. It begins with a people who are hungry, hungry not for the things of this world but for the presence of God.

It is in this context that people are ready, really ready for the coming of Christ into their lives. When all other options are closed, when we have exhausted our personal resources and found our idols wanting, then and only then are we ready, really ready for a season of hope.

William Willimon told about his director of music at Duke University. He refused to eat at any crowded, loud restaurants, and when he went to see Duke's basketball team play he always wore earplugs. He explained,

“When your life is music, your tools are your ears, and you have to be very careful. The difference between making good music and great music is often the slightest variations in sound. Therefore I must guard my hearing.”

Willimon went on to note that we in the modern world are always being bombarded with sights and sounds. Sensory overload has created a kind of numbness in our lives.

And that's why the season of Advent is so important to us. It gives us an opportunity to sit in the darkness for a while. It gives us an opportunity to hear the “sounds of silence” as Simon and Garfunkel put it.

Advent makes us sensitive to the nuances of life. Only when we sit in the darkness can we see that fragile light which dawns in the birth of the Christ child. Only when we take time to be silent can we hear the sound of angel choirs singing.

I am really excited about the fact that the Presbyterian Women have been studying the church year in their lessons this year.

One leader recently told me,

“Before we had this study I was baffled by how we did the Christmas season in this church. Everyone else was singing the familiar Christmas carols, but we were still singing those unfamiliar Advent hymns.

Now I understand that Advent is an important part of the church year.

In order to really experience the coming of Christ, we do indeed need a season of preparation. We need to prepare to receive Christ through the watch of anticipation, the act of repentance, the attitude of humility and the submission of faith.”

I must say that after ten years of preaching the necessity of Advent, her comments were most welcome.

It’s not an easy thing to overcome the sound and fury of the world at Christmas. But, that’s what we’re called to do.

BRING CANDLES

I’ve told this story before, but I’m going to tell it again because it really gets at the essence of what Advent is really all about.

It seems that there was an eclipse in colonial New England. The state legislature was in session at that time, and since no one understood what was happening, many of the representatives panicked.

Several even moved to adjourn.

But, one of the lawmakers said,

“Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. But, if it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you sir, that candles be brought.”

I move that we do the same this day. Bring candles. Let us light the candles of Advent. Let us watch out for that day which comes. But, in the meantime, let us also be found doing our duty as disciples of Jesus Christ.

To him be the honor and glory forever and ever.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN