



Dec 3: KEEP AWAKE | MARK 13:24-37

Growing up, my family did not attend church. We weren't a Christian family. But we did believe. We believed in Christmas! And we were devout.

We believed in Christmas Eve and Christmas day, Santa Clause, and Christmas movies, and the Christmas tree, stockings, and lights and presents and presents!

On Christmas Eve, as kids my brother Mark and I would jostle each other to try and stay awake past our bedtimes, trying to keep our eyes peeled, straining to catch a glimpse of Santa.

Around the end of Thanksgiving, we'd noticed our parents acting "weird" or maybe "weirder". Whisperings amongst the parental units, secretly hauling in packages when they thought we weren't paying attention, strange disappearances in the evenings to the den upstairs to wrap Christmas gifts.

After a bit, we'd hear through the ceiling...closet doors creaking open and gently banging shut. Telltale signs they had just stashed the latest wrapped Christmas gift.

They thought they were being so secretive.

They didn't stand a chance.

That time of year, my brother and I could have worked surveillance for the FBI.

We were on high alert, watching our parents' every move, logging their comings and goings, comparing notes, every nerve ending alive to what was going on!

We surveillanced all sorts of odd behaviors that made our Christmas, well...Christmas!

And as I reflected on past Christmases for today, I came up surprised and grateful. That even though we were not being spiritual or even remotely looking to God when I was a kid, I was developing much needed skills. I was learning a long list of helpful proficiencies and aptitudes. Building muscle memory that actually translate well for Advent as an adult.

Maybe you will connect with this as well.

As a kid, the waiting, the watching, the noticing, the staying awake, the listening...the anticipating good stuff to come (which is living into hope), waiting for Santa to arrive.

Those skills prepared me for and still serve me well, now, today as an adult. As an adult waiting, watching, anticipating, waiting for our Savior's birth.

Transferable skills. It is the waiting and watching and the noticing, now as spiritual practices that opens up our Advent experience. Essential practices to help us anticipate God's actions and notice his Presence and recognize God's work.

Keeping our eyes peeled to catch how God is revealing his work, showing us God's efforts and activity all throughout Advent. Maybe the kids can reteach us those skills.

Learning from our kids could help us not only put God back into Christmas but simultaneously enrich our Advent journey.

That's what "being awake to God" or "keeping or staying awake" means for us this Advent as God's children. With child-like awe and wonder, stay awake as we wait for and recognize God's inbreaking.

And we know, we know staying focused and awake to God is not easy. Our world is not wired for the spirituality of Christ as much as it is for the commercialism of Santa. We inhabit a world that draws our attention away from God.

For instance, I picked up (pick up the paper) the Star Tribune on Wednesday, just to see what the newspapers were trying to get us to pay attention to.

Did you know NATO is pressing for aid to the Ukraine? As the war rages on. The truce has ended in the Gaza Strip. Hostilities have restarted. The Floyd Square business owners are suing the city of Minneapolis for damages to property during the riots.

Locally in the Dummer...Did you notice the Holiday Orchestra with Ringers and Singers is coming Sunday, December 10th at 7:00pm at the Buffalo High School, tickets are 12 to 15 dollars. Ooohhh...I'm going to that.

I'm not saying newspapers are bad. But they can pull us away from even thinking of watching or noticing God is alive, at work, doing tremendous good all the time AND in this new season.

Because we are now in the season of Advent! The church is so beautiful, all these wonderful decorations. The manger, truly stunning! I have never seen anything like it.

You know, I found out recently the boards to make the manger came from the trees on this property. When the trees were cleared to build this church the lumber was used to build the manger.

Craig Lilja and many others built it in Dianne McLain's driveway. I apologize for missing many details. But still a great hopeful story, they were building for the future. Good story for the beginning of Advent.

We lit the hope candle and we have the Hanging of the Greens. Festive and wonderful.

But did you know that originally, Advent was a somber season? I didn't. It was a season of fasting and repentance, not Christmas carols and shiny tinsel and all the stuff we think of today.

Jarring contrasts.

And then I came across this quote from Patricia De Jong, "**The coming of Advent jolts the church out of its normal rhythms, with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness.**" Advent comes to us as a shock, disruptive, shaking us out of our spiritual slumber, jouncing and bouncing us awake!

The text for today certainly came as a bit of a shock. Did you notice?

After some distress...more distress apparently.

But in those days, following that distress,

‘the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
25 the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

What is going on here!?

What a strange passage for Advent.

This odd text from Mark is often referred to as the “little apocalypse.” It is a piece of apocalyptic literature. And maybe when you hear the word “apocalyptic” you may be thinking “end of the world” stuff or zombies.

Actually, I read the ringing of bells is supposed to usher in the apocalypse. Can’t wait for our handbell choir to usher in the end of the world. Can’t think of a better way to enter into glory than listening to those bells!

But actually, the word “apocalypse” simply means “revelation”. Something hidden will be revealed and made known to us. The what or how, we don’t know. And as for when, Jesus says in verse 32, **“about that hour or day no one knows”**.

Putting that all together, Advent is therefore about the coming revelation of God, the shocking and disruptive and surprising inbreaking of God into the world and into our lives anew. Wow!

And add to that this idea...so amazing I can’t shake it. That apocalyptic literature, may not always point to “the end of the world” but it does point to the end of the world *as we know it*.

End of the world as we know it? For the war to cease in the Ukraine and everywhere.

Permanent peace between Israel and the Hamas. No more race riots, murder, and destruction of property.

In times of despair and crisis, an end or a change to the world as we know it doesn’t sound all that bad. It can be a source of hope.

Mark’s gospel was written during one of these times of despair and crisis. It was around the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The writer uses this story to offer hope to the early Christian church. Help them combat by faith they saw going on in the world around them, to remind them of the hope they have in Jesus despite the apparent destruction.

Mark’s message seems extremely relevant and on point for us today.

Four times Jesus tells the disciples to stay awake, stay alert during a time of destruction and chaos. They are to look for signs of Jesus, who is their hope – and ours.

Staying awake is essential. Because the alternative to staying awake is too costly.

Jesus warns us to not be found “asleep”. Meaning becoming spiritually and emotionally complacent or cynical. Given the realities of the world today, falling asleep is possible. Very easy, too easy to become complacent or cynical by either thinking that everything is okay or despairing that it never will be.

Yet we are called to “keep awake” looking for signs of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us in the world and in our midst. Staying awake then becomes an act of hope and trust, reversing cynicism and fear.

I wonder what headlines we did NOT see in the Drummer this week? Legitimate and interesting, good stories. What good things happened in your life just this past week that didn't make it in the papers? I'd subscribe to that paper!

As we begin Advent, what is one thing we could commit to doing this season to prepare us spiritually for Christmas, for the “coming anew” of Jesus into our lives and world? What can we do to “stay awake”?

I recommend what has already been introduced to us during Early Word. A simple spiritual practice to encourage wakefulness and attention to God's Presence and work all around us.

Give yourself to creating some space to awaken to Christ this season. Give five minutes each day to be still, breathe deeply and open yourself to seeing, really seeing what is going on around you.

What can you see in your home, in the grocery store, what do you notice out shopping or doing chores in how people treat each other? What do you hear? What do you notice you want to do to love and serve others?

Staying awake is both being alert to the signs of Jesus' reign in our community AND being open to participating in those signs and the bringing of the kingdom.

And one way to partner with God, is to simply come each Sunday and jot down what you've seen God do thru someone or something you did for someone. Keep the notes anonymous. And put it in our Sparkle Box. We'll open the box later and share them during a service.

So, let's not become a sleepy or sleeping church. Imagine after engaging in the Sparkle Box all through Advent, how much more alert and noticing of God we will be after one month. The muscle memory we will have built up?

Our spiritual “guns” will be amazing!

Imagine how a month's effort could lead us into the New Year, being alert to God but also all the more ready to join God where God is leading, doing only ever in response to God, flowing more from our spiritual foundation.

Let's do it!

Time of Reflection: How might you set an intention or a reminder to notice and note in our Sparkle Box, good things being done, good things you are doing or noticing God's activity all throughout Advent?