

Awaken our Hearts  
Mark 13:24-37  
December 3, 2017  
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- I. Today is the first Sunday of Advent.
- A. It is New Year's day on the Christian calendar, the day we begin a new Christian year.
    - 1. Advent means 'coming' and it proclaims the coming of Christ as a baby in Bethlehem,
    - 2. the incarnate presence of God come among us in flesh and bone.
    - 3. Advent also celebrates the coming of Christ, not just once long ago,
    - 4. but promising to come again.
  - B. The early Christians expected that Jesus would return very soon.
    - 1. And when that did not happen, they had to deal with living between the 'already' and the 'not yet,'
    - 2. between the stories of the helpless babe in Bethlehem
    - 3. and the Son of Man who was coming in the clouds with great power.
  - C. And that in-between time was marked by suffering and persecution, oppression and destruction.
    - 1. They lived through the kinds of things that made them cry out:
    - 2. Where are you God? We need you now- come now!
    - 3. The first part of Mark 13, preceding today's text, talks about
    - 4. wars, earthquakes, famines, families rising up against each other, desolation and tribulation.
  - D. What you need to understand is that all the terrible things it described are *not* predictions of future events.
    - 1. They are descriptions of what Christians had already seen people around them suffer.
    - 2. Jesus' words were intended of words of comfort in the midst of present circumstances, in the midst of pain and suffering.
    - 3. Jesus was saying that the suffering would come to an end.
    - 4. In the understanding of those who lived in the first century,
    - 5. stars were symbolic of the rulers of the world.
    - 6. So when Jesus says the stars will fall, he is saying the tyrants that ruled the world would fall.
  - E. Jesus is also imparting words of wisdom for how to live between the already and the not yet.
    - 1. Jesus is talking about how to live in the now, in the present moment.
    - 2. And that's the thing that gets missed.
    - 3. Stories like this focus on dualistic thinking: good and evil, past and future.
    - 4. Yet what Jesus is pointing us to is the present moment, the now,
    - 5. the place where we can learn to simply be present to what is without wanting to numb out or escape.

6. Put another way, to stay awake rather than fall asleep.
- F. The world around us is filled with as much violence, loss, pain and suffering as the first century Roman Empire.
1. And at this time of year, our consumer economy does its best to distract us from reality.
  2. We are lured with idyllic visions of Christmas, beautifully decorated houses, gaily wrapped gifts.
  3. Oh, the gifts that lure us, promising to lull us into oblivion:
  4. electronic gadgets of every kind that fill our every waking moment,
  5. seducing us into states resembling suspended animation, a falling asleep of sorts.
- G. We are enticed to fill our time with shopping. The Thanksgiving day newspaper was bigger than the Sunday paper.
1. It was fully four inches thick, stuffed with ads from every retailer in a fifty mile radius.
  2. Jesus is trying to wake us up from our attempts to buy peace of mind,
  3. to lift our unknowing hearts to the reality of a peace the world cannot give.
  4. Life is precious and we do not want to risk spending what little time we have on endless shopping.
- H. I know this resonates with you, because when I started using the recent blessing that begins “life is short,”
1. people were tearing it out of the bulletin and taking it home with them.
  2. “Life is short. We have not much time to gladden the hearts of those who journey with us.
  3. Therefore, be swift to love, make haste to be kind and seek peace.”
- I. There is a sense of urgency in today’s gospel.
1. There is a sense of urgency we feel when we respond strongly to the words,
  2. ‘life is short - we have not much time.’
  3. Whether Christ comes again tomorrow or not, the fact remains that life can end unexpectedly for us at any moment.
  4. My nineteen year old nephew was in the Thanksgiving Classic at Southern National Motorsports Park last Sunday.
  5. His car was hit so hard it spun around facing the opposite direction.
  6. He said it’s the hardest hit he’s ever taken.
  7. The race car is totaled but he’s alive and just really sore.
- J. It’s time to wake up.
1. The moment you’re living right now is the only one you have.
  2. You can’t live in the past or the future, only now, this moment.
  3. It’s time to wake up.
  4. Start living your spiritual life now;
  5. pay attention to those who need your attention now;
  6. reach out in generosity and compassion now.

- K. Whether Christ comes again tomorrow or not, Christ comes to us everyday in the people that cross our path.
1. Whether a person needs a smile or a kind word,
  2. we can't offer it if we don't notice that they need it.
  3. We notice people and things around us when we are mindful, centered, truly present to what is right before us.
- L. As Richard Rohr puts it:
1. "Jesus teaches and is himself a message of now-ness, here-ness,
  2. concreteness, and this-ness.
  3. The only time Jesus talks about future time is when he tells us not to worry about it." (Rohr, Daily Meditations November 19, 2017)
- M. Instead, Jesus turns our attention to the present moment.
1. He says, keep alert, be on the watch, keep awake.
  2. Again he says, keep awake.
  3. We *learn* how to keep awake when we engage in centering prayer, when we practice meditation or walk the labyrinth.
  4. These ancient Christian practices ground us in the present moment,
  5. connect us to God, the source of love and peace.
- J. We don't have to let the headlines drive us to be cynical, pessimistic and withdrawing.
1. Jesus is asking to watch with our hearts and not with our eyes.
  2. No matter the appearance of the outer world, there is an inner reality
  3. that empowers us to live not despairing of the past or fearing the future,
  4. but quiet, still, and untroubled in the present moment, in the eternal now of God.
- K. Early Christians were looking for the end times, the return of Christ when the kingdom of God would come in all its fullness.
1. We know that the kingdom of God is now, in our hearts.
  2. What Jesus is asking is for us to let him come into our hearts;
  3. that is to allow Advent to happen in our hearts.
- L. As one ancient saint put it: "You are a world within a world;
1. look within yourself, and see there the whole creation.
  2. Do not look at exterior things but turn all your attention to that which lies within.
  3. Gather together your whole mind within the intellectual treasure-house of your soul." (St. Nilus of Ancyra in Kallistos Ware, The Orthodox Way, p. 86)
- M. St. Isaac the Syrian, another ancient saint says:
1. "Be at peace with your own soul; then heaven and earth will be at peace with you.
  2. Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you,
  3. and so you will see the things that are in heaven;
  4. for there is but one single entry to them both.
  5. The ladder that leads to the kingdom is hidden within your soul." (in Kallistos Ware, The Orthodox Way, p. 71)

N. And to bring it into the current vernacular, Richard Rohr reminds us:

1. "It takes constant intention and practice
2. to remain open, receptive, and awake to the moment."  
(Daily Meditation, November 24, 2017)
3. That is what Jesus is reminding us to do: keep awake.

O. Keeping awake, remaining in the present moment, empowers us through God, the source of love and peace.

1. Richard Rohr explains it this way:
2. "Whether we realize it or not, the divine energy of God is flowing through each one of us.
3. When we draw upon this Source consciously,
4. our life starts filling with what some call coincidences or synchronicitys which we can never explain."
5. It is also what today's collect calls on God to do for us:
6. to "lift up our unknowing hearts, and waken our sleeping love to announce the coming dawn of unexpected peace."

P. As we light the candles during this Advent season, we are taking seriously the message of today's gospel.

1. We keep awake, we watch in hope.
2. Though we may live in a time of darkened sun and waning moon,
3. we watch with our hearts and not our eyes,
4. resting in the peace of the present moment, in the eternal now of God.