

# Keep Awake

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Damascus United Methodist Church

**Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37**

First Sunday of Advent – November 27, 2011

Just 3 days ago, most of us were giving thanks and enjoying times with those we love. We were eating more than usual, watching football, and playing games with lots of laughter. Some were catching up on life with loved ones, while others chose to experience (or not) a shopping marathon together.

In East Tennessee, 22 of my family members gathered around Ma-maw (southern for Grandmother) as she played the piano. It was just like my childhood- all requesting our favorite hymns and carols as we sang in 4-part harmony- a true God moment (okay- for some of us more than others). In between meals, we delighted in snacking on home-made chocolate chip cookies, fudge, ambrosia, clementines and the always popular Chex mix. On Friday, sharing in the thanksgiving leftovers was wonderful. Now, after recently eating all of that turkey (full of its sleepy tryptophan) and after going to bed later than we usually do, don't you find it ironic that today, Jesus tells us "keep awake"? How does 'keep awake' fit into our lives?

It's today, when we find ourselves tired from Thanksgiving celebrations, that we welcome the church's new year. So, it's appropriate to hear 'Keep Awake.' The first Sunday of Advent always ushers in the church's new year by beginning with the end: the second coming of Christ.

Admittedly, the way the gospel describes the second coming of Christ sounds somewhat scary and dark (with a darkened sun and a moon with no light). Most of us have experienced something like that during a tornado warning or a severe thunderstorm - when we must take cover. We do not know what will come to pass. All we can do is watch and wait.

However, Mark's Gospel tells us, that after all of **that suffering**, the **best is yet to come**-- the coming of the Lord occurs! From chapter 13 verse 26, *then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.*" From all places on earth and heaven, **all suffering will go away**, because God is calling God's children home. From all corners of the earth, God is calling all the people of God- those who are cast aside, those who feel connected and those who feel they aren't worthy. This includes all who are scattered and all who feel unloved. You see, to keep awake for the end times means to be gathered into the people of God. It is a message of hope.

In the meantime, since scripture tells us only God knows when the end times will happen, how are we to live? Jesus tells us we are to 'keep awake.' Live our life in

expectation -like we're waiting for a loved one to come home. We experience this when a college student comes home on a break or when family members travel to see each other for the holidays. The feeling is similar to waiting for the troops to arrive. We know reinforcements are coming, so we watch with anticipation and excitement as we hope we can hang in there, and last until they arrive.

When I was a young Mom, I remember long days when I expectantly counted the hours until Wes would get home from work. Parenting 3 active little boys, some days, sapped my energy and endurance more some days than others. When one of our sons was sick or overly adventurous, I hopefully watched the clock and prayed my patience would last until the time Wes walked in the door. At last, **he** could take a turn with our crying or adventurous child. During that time of waiting, it's as if God was encouraging me all along saying -- hold on a little longer, Linda, because Wes is almost home.

From today's Gospel reading, the fig tree parable speaks to this idea of holding on. Scripture tells us when the fig tree branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, that's how we'll know it is God. We can be in difficult situations in our life, and we think we're not going to make it. We can doubt what's going on. We can be scared and depressed. But, be on the lookout in those tender spots, because **God is always at work**. Be on the lookout, because when we least expect it, it could be that God is going to surprise us. No difficulty is impossible with a God who is always making things new. Even in 539 BCE, the Jews experienced this reality in their relationship with God.

Previous to our Old Testament Isaiah 64 scripture, the Jews had been forced from their much-loved Jerusalem to live in exile in Babylon. 'Distraught' only begins to describe how they felt living in Babylon. Then, in 539 BCE, the Persians, under Cyrus, conquered Babylon.

When the Jews felt all was lost, miraculously, God made all things new and led Cyrus to allow the Jews to return home. This was a dream come true! But, when they arrived in their beloved Jerusalem, it was full of desolation. Their Temple was destroyed. Their spirits sagged. They felt the enormous weight of rebuilding within the ruins. As scripture tells us, they felt guilty from their own sinfulness and resulting separation from God.

In the midst of this despair, Isaiah, the prophet, cries out to God, "Make your presence known- as you have in the past – like on Mt Sinai." Isaiah recognizes that the Jewish people, in the midst of their sinfulness, need a redeemer- God alone- who will return their hearts to "doing right." Isaiah reminds God that "you are our father." Isaiah does so to stress that God is the one who gives life and identity to Israel ...*you are the potter....we are the clay*...In that relationship of Father, a permanent relationship is emphasized and in it rests all of Israel's hope.

As with the Jews in Isaiah, hope is what undergirds our encouragement to keep awake in our living. But honestly, real life can be scary, and sometimes, we have to

remind ourselves who is in control – God and not us. At times, we face medical treatment, losing our job or house, dealing with distanced family and friends and other miscellaneous stresses. Just as Jesus described with the fig tree, it is during these tender spots of life that leaves sprout forth, and we see that God is present. During this season of Advent, try growing your spiritual life. Practice looking for signs that God is at work in your life—at home, in the car, at school and in the workplace. Keep awake. Focus on the practice of giving your scariest and most tender times to God.

But that’s not all that we can learn about ‘keep awake.’ The Gospel makes another connection. Jesus shares the parable about the deputized servants who await the master’s return. In doing so, Jesus urges us to live in that balance between anticipation and obedience. The former without the latter can lead to laziness and lack of sacrifice. And, when a person shows dedication to responsibilities without hope, this can result in feelings of drudgery or spiritual and moral laziness. Balance is the key here as we ‘keep awake.’

But, even while practicing a balance of anticipation and obedience, how do we learn to wait for God? We learn this by participating in the here and now. We focus on trying to enjoy the wonder of the moment, by simply being present and by not rushing ahead. Because as humans, sometimes, we wait with anticipation that turns into frustration and panic, and we lose the joy of ‘being.’ Our Holy Scriptures promise us pictures of milk and honey, of food that will satisfy, of a time that will have tears no more. But we also hear scary descriptions that we shrink from imagining- of blood, fire and judgment, and in Advent, we wait for both: the coming of a child and the second coming of the resurrected Christ, the days of glory and the days of reckoning. We wait to become the people God has promised to make us, spiritual people who clearly see and know God in the flesh.

So in the meantime, what is the nature of our demeanor? How do we wait? In a flurry of preparation? In a long silence of awe? In celebration? In humility? Kneeling in repentance? Out in the Soup kitchens - in gratitude? All of these practices serve to balance our spiritual living and to help us keep awake.

During the four weeks of Advent, we can purposely focus on a journey of deeper spiritual awareness. Advent can become a patient process of recognizing God’s presence in our lives to form us...of knowing that God - whose presence can shake the heavens and make the mountains tremble- has come to **dwelt with us, in us, and to make us whole**. This knowledge inspires great confidence and humble gratitude.

We can begin anew right now. Because, even if the heavens are not split open, we can find, at the power of a forgiving word, an invitation extended, a small kindness done, that we feel ourselves tremble with wonder and with awe. As Jesus encourages us, we can keep awake and stay alert for the ways in which God is at work within us and in the world around us.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a Christian theologian describes this idea best, “What better way to live -- than in the grip of a promise, and a divine one at that?”...to take nothing for granted or to take everything **as granted**, *though not yet grasped*. To handle every moment of one’s life as a seed of the promise..[even though]The promise may not be fully in hand. It may still be on the way, but to live reverently, deliberately and fully awake- that is what it means to live in the promise, where **the wait itself is as rich as its end**.” “All of our moments are God’s times- rolling out ahead of us like a red carpet for us to walk on.” (Gospel Medicine p.40-41)

To which Jesus, in Mark’s gospel, says, “Keep awake.”

To which we say, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Amen.