

“Waiting Ain’t Easy”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
First Sunday of Advent – Year B
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Mark 13: 24-37

It can be hard to stay awake, especially if it’s well beyond your bedtime. Any of you who have driven through the night to reach your vacation or family destination can attest to that. As children, we may attempt to stay awake on a special night, such as Christmas Eve, to see if we hear a certain jolly elf on top of our roof.

What keeps us awake? A baby crying at five in the morning? An alarm clock ringing in our ears? The boom-boom-boom of the passing car’s stereo outside the house?

What keeps us awake? The anxiety over our retirement savings? The worry about a medical test result? Children struggling to make the best decisions for their future? What keeps us awake?

Staying awake when we are sleepy or tired implies something else we are doing: waiting. We stay awake in order to await someone’s arrival, or perhaps the culmination of a specific event. And even when we are staying awake because of more serious issues, we are still waiting for something to happen. We’re waiting for some resolution to a loved one’s medical situation. We’re waiting for a decision about our job status. We’re waiting for someone’s response to an invitation we have extended. If we weren’t staying awake, then we wouldn’t be waiting for something to happen. And no matter what we are waiting for, waiting ain’t easy.

As we begin the season of Advent once again, we are called to keep awake, to be prepared, and to wait. It can be very hard to wait. It can be hard to wait for change to happen. It can be hard to wait for God to answer our prayers. It can be hard to wait for a Messiah to arrive. It can be hard to wait for a Savior to return and rule his kingdom.

We hear in this passage from Mark a longing for God’s Son to return, and the searching for signs of when that time will arrive. It always seems strange to begin this season of waiting for the Christ Child by reading an apocalyptic vision from Mark’s Gospel. But the thread which connects both of these narratives is waiting for God’s arrival. And so we consider the way we are called to wait expectantly, not just for a child to be born, but for a Savior to return.

These sayings of Jesus come near the end of his ministry – in fact, it immediately precedes Jesus’ passion narrative in Mark. Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly life, and he knows his followers will be anxious and concerned after he is gone. He attempts to give them some assurances, speaking in images which would have sounded familiar to them. In fact, there is much in this passage which mirrors passages from the Old Testament books of Isaiah

(13:10, 34:4), Joel (2:10, 3:4,4:15), Ezekiel (32:7,8), and Daniel (7:13) (*Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©2008: 23).

To begin, Jesus uses cosmic imagery to get his disciples' attention, as he attempts to wake up his followers: "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in heaven will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:24-26). Jesus' listeners would have remembered these visions from the prophets of the Old Testament, and it would have helped them consider what to look for in their expectant waiting.

Second, Jesus uses an image which we've heard before, but in a different way. The fig tree appears in Mark 11, and Jesus used it as a reminder of how the end will come to those who doubt God. This time, Jesus uses the fig tree as a sign of life: "As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that (the Son of Man) is near, at the very gates" (13:28-29). These signs are evidence of a new beginning, and Jesus assures his disciples that "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Finally, Jesus speaks in ways which reinforce the importance of being prepared, not watching the calendar. He talks about a master who leaves on a journey, and places his servants in charge of his home. The master tells his slaves to be on their watch, but he never tells them which day or time he will return. Jesus says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." And the master's return is truly foretelling. Remember how Jesus said these things right before his betrayal and death? "You know not when the master will come - in the evening, or at midnight, or at the cockcrow, or at dawn." "Keep awake" is not only a command for us today; it was also a command which his disciples would fail to keep in their master's most dire hour.

It's not hard for us today to wait for the coming of the Christ Child. We know the date on the calendar when Jesus arrives. We have Advent Calendars and advertising circulars to remind us that we're only a certain number of days away from Christmas. Keep awake? How can we not keep awake when we know the hour and place and time when our awaiting the Christ Child will come to an end?

Mark's audience had no such luxury. To begin, they were not awaiting the arrival of the Christ Child - they were awaiting the Messiah's second coming. And there was no calendar with the date set aside for that arrival. The early church was a community which had no idea when to expect their master's return, and they sought signs, evidence - anything to help assuage their anxiety.

We still have no calendar with a date, "This is when the Second Coming will take place." God doesn't hand those out at the holidays. For over two thousand years, the church has been waiting, keeping awake, wondering when the master will return. And out of our desire for control and certainty, we

search for clues as to the time, the place, the specific way God will act. We focus on when, and not on how.

Jesus tells his followers – and us – that it’s not a matter of when and what, but how we prepare for his arrival. “Only the Father” knows when that time is, so don’t worry about predicting what God is going to do. Instead, consider how to wait, how to keep awake, how to best prepare for what God is sending.

As Americans, we are lousy at waiting. We demand the latest technology to meet our demand for knowledge of the latest information. (use Siri to ask, “When will Jesus come back?”) We cannot wait to purchase the latest thing, and our use of credit cards is a prime example of that tendency. We expect our needs to be met immediately, especially when they threaten our individual status quo.

I can tell you from personal experience what it is like to not wait very well. In April 2010, Debbie and I made the decision to put an offer on a house, and when it was accepted, we then had to sell our old house. We were hopeful, optimistic, and had no reason to believe that it would take us a significant amount of time to wait for it to be sold. Perhaps we were naïve, perhaps we were blissfully ignorant. I don’t think so, but who knows. The fact of the matter was we were made painfully aware of what it means to wait – truly wait – for a resolution.

14 months of double-mortgage payments. Three real estate agents. Borrowing money from family. Trying to keep all of our obligations and commitments while not having any increase in our household income. It was not – it is not – easy, to say the least. But it has been our reminder to never believe that the waiting will lead to what is easy. Often, the waiting requires sacrifice, patience, and a firm faith in what is truly important.

It may be waiting for a house to sell, or it may be something else altogether. And yet, waiting ain’t easy. It can be hard to wait for a family member to follow-through on their promise to change their behavior. It can be hard to wait for elderly parents to come to grips with their need for assistance beyond their own capabilities. It can be hard to wait for a friend to offer forgiveness when you have sinned against him. But even in the most difficult times of waiting, we are reminded that God is coming, “for my words will not pass away.”

As a community of faith, it can be very hard to wait. It can be hard to wait for the visitors who come through our doors to become active, vibrant members of the community of faith. It can be hard to wait for men and women and families to give financially out of gratitude and faith, not out of fear and complacency, so that ministries might expand and not contract. It can be hard to wait for new ministries to bear fruit, for brothers and sisters in faith to become fully active, for growth to occur in our numbers, our spirituality, our commitment to God. But even in the most difficult times of waiting, we are reminded that God is coming, “for my words will not pass away.”

The Advent journey is a time of active waiting. Our calling is not to passively wait for God to do whatever it is God is going to do. Our calling is

to look around, discover God's presence, "see the signs" of God's activity in our life as individuals and as a community. Then, through our discernment of God's presence, we are called to trust:

Trust in the one whose words will never pass away.

Trust in the one who will bring peace to a world overrun by chaos.

Trust in the one who is God's incarnate love.

Trust in the one who will come again, "even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'" (A Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA).

Friends, the time has come to keep awake. May we joyfully, humbly, and expectantly prepare for the breadth of God's love which is arriving.

Thanks be to God. Amen.