

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“On Your Marks: Keeping Awake”**

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Mark 13:32-37

December 18, 2022

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, we'll be wrapping up our time in the thirteenth chapter of Mark, which as a whole, focuses on Jesus' teaching his disciples of what's to come, namely the time leading up to his return. And the reason we're doing so is because the season of Advent isn't just about preparing to celebrate Christ's coming as a child in Bethlehem, but also preparing for Christ's return in power and glory. And as we've seen, not everything Jesus has been teaching about his return has been rosy. There's hardship, but within that word of caution, of warning, the deeper word is one of hope, that no matter how dark the times get, the light of God shines, and Christ is coming.

That word of hope is what defines this season of Advent, and it's not an empty one; it's not content to be left to platitudes or season's greetings. It's not passive either, where we just sit back idly waiting. We are called to more than that. Let's go to God's Word together.

*<sup>32</sup> 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'*

*Mark 13:32-37*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If you've been following an Advent calendar in your own homes, you'll know that the days until Christmas are getting fewer and fewer. If you have some kind of a countdown, you'll know that the numbers are getting smaller and smaller. Or if you have a to-do list, you'll have realized that the time remaining to get all of that done is getting less and less.

This seems a somewhat obvious point, but the very notion of an Advent calendar or a countdown assumes that the end date is known. We know that Christmas is December 25, and working backwards from that we can pretty much plan out all the things that we would expect to happen between now and then, or we can map out all the things that need to happen or need to get done between now and then, and if we're cutting it close, we can make some hours in the day to get the job done, leading up to, as I expect we'll be doing, some frantic assemblies and preparations, staying awake into wee hours of mornings and all that. Because we know, that it's all got to get done before the waking hours on December 25.

But imagine with me if you would, just what the month of December would be like if we didn't know what day Christmas would happen. We knew it would happen at some point, but it could be the 25<sup>th</sup>, the 26<sup>th</sup>, the 6<sup>th</sup>, or the 12<sup>th</sup>. No one would know. There's just some master Christmas elf or something who would keep the day of Christmas a secret, but then somehow on a particular morning in December—and it'd be different every year—the announcement would be made known that when you would be waking up in the morning expecting to go about your usual routine, you would somehow find out that today was Christmas, and now everything needed to happen.

I can tell there are some folks cringing just at the thought of it. Of an unknown Christmas, a surprise Christmas. It almost feels like the bad dream of finding out you have a test that you didn't prepare for. (I have that same dream too, it's just about finding out I'm supposed to give a sermon, and I don't have one ready.) It almost feels that way. You wake up only to find out that Christmas was now, and whatever you had prepared had to be ready to go right then and there.

Tell me, what would change about our Decembers if that were the case, if Christmas were a surprise, if it moved around? Would we still try to get everything else ready like we normally would? Would we just have a turkey and casseroles perpetually in the fridge, ready to go in the oven? Would there be presents in closets ready to come out? Now I'm thinking as far as church went, if we would get the nod from this Christmas elf in charge of calling Christmas that it would be a day-of decision to do our Christmas Eve services. I can feel our staff and musicians shudder at that kind of situation. I kind of do too.

And yet, when it comes to waiting and preparing for the return of our King, that's more like what Jesus teaches us to expect. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." In other words, the day of this return, this second Advent, this big day, is something like a Christmas that you knew would happen, you just didn't know when.

For Harold Camping, May 21, 2011, was going to be a big day, one way or another. If you don't recognize the name, Harold Camping was a Christian broadcaster who famously predicted

that May 21, 2011, would be the date of the Rapture, in which God would take all of the saved up to heaven, and all the not-so-saved would be left behind. (And honestly the very notion of a rapture like that is a point for some discussion that we don't have time for today, suffice it to say, I'm not so sure that's what Scripture tells us, but if you're curious to know more, let's talk.) Regardless, May 21, 2011, came and went. No Rapture, so Mr. Camping's big day turned out to be a big embarrassment.

What was more interesting was how everyone else responded. Most dismissed the prediction. Most didn't give it a second thought. But some managed to have a bit of fun with it. For example, on Facebook, over 800,000 people pledged to attend an event called "Post Rapture Looting", thinking, well, it's not like they're not going to need their stuff anymore.

And I remember where I was on May 21. I was at a wedding in Athens, Georgia. My friends at this wedding weren't exactly the religious sort, so they knew they weren't going anywhere. But they knew I was in seminary, so as the evening went on, they found my presence there more and more surprising. They'd come up to me, a bit hesitant at first. They'd ask, "So how's your evening going?" I'd say, "Fine." Then they'd pause, look at me a little funny, and say, "Didn't quite make the cut, did you?" And I found as we were laughing about it, that I was laughing harder than any of them, because I didn't want to be associated with any of those other "crazy people."

There was another kind of response to May 21. There were those who left their jobs, committed their life savings, sold their homes, all for the sake of their belief that God was coming. And I feel that, whatever you think about the notion of the rapture or about that vein of theology in general, they were tapping into something important that other "sensible" Christians can often treat with mockery: urgency.

It is an urgency that lies behind our passage today. Jesus' words to his disciples are not simply a warning to guard themselves against the coming sufferings. They are a call to vigilance, an urgent watchfulness for the glorious return of Jesus. Verse 35 puts it powerfully: "Keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come."

Of course, many in the earliest years of the church took these words to heart. They believed that Jesus could return any day now. They responded in their actions and in their evangelism with urgency. God had called them to this work, and there wasn't much time to do it. But a generation came and went. Then another. And another. No doubt there were many who, just like Mr. Camping, boldly calculated the date of Jesus' return and, just like Mr. Camping, were disappointed. Over time, a cold reality set in: Jesus would not be coming back as quickly as some had hoped.

So, after 2,000 years the Church has had to learn to be patient. It's had to learn to interpret such urgent passages as Mark 13 in a different light. It's had to learn to be ready for the long haul. And good things I sense have come from that transition. But in doing so, I fear we too often lost sight of the urgency that runs through much of the New Testament for the sake of the long haul.

I fear we may talk so much about financial stewardship and sustainability that we forget that all our resources are temporary. I fear we may talk so much about good church order and polity that we forget that our lives, much less our ministries, are not ours to arrange. And I fear we may talk so much about self-care that we forget that we are called to take up our cross and follow Him. Don't get me wrong: sustainability, good order, and self-care can all be very good and needed things, because we're not designed to constantly run ourselves into exhaustion and burnout. That's wrong on so many levels. But such approaches have led to a latent complacency in the life of faith that I fear plagues our lives and our churches. We can be satisfied to sit on the work that has already been done and content to do only that which can be deemed "sustainable."

What is worse is that rather than rest, be satisfied and content, we still let other things keep us awake at night. We take the urgency that should be with one thing and put it with others. I myself have caught certain thoughts floating around my head. Maybe you've caught them too. Thoughts like: you better finish a good paper, or project, or sermon. Or, you better close out the fiscal year strong, or meet that next advancement, or get that school admission. Or, you better get your child to the next thing, and be on time to the next thing, and have everything ready for the other things. And my question is: if this is what keeps us awake at night, then what is it exactly that we're watching for?

My friends, we have to come clean. Are we actually still looking for Jesus? Are we looking with the urgency that He has called us to watch with? Or have we let the "pressing" concerns of this world keep us awake instead?

So my friends, what then do we do? A master of a house goes on a journey. While gone, the master puts the servants in charge, and gives work to each. My friends, we have been given work by the master of the house. We have been called to love each other, and not just for longevity's sake. We are called to love *urgently*, as if the master could be coming back tomorrow.

What does this urgent love look like? It's being more concerned with how to help someone than with how helping might hurt you. It's being more concerned with how someone else could use the last five dollars in your pocket than with what you could be saving up for. It's being more concerned with seeking reconciliation with someone than with the potential awkwardness it could cause to bring it up. It's being more concerned with the extra ten minutes you give to someone in need than with what you're going to be late for. It's being more concerned with the world's immediate need for the gospel of Jesus Christ than with our desire for worldly standing and

respect. It's being more concerned with how the Church watches for Jesus than with how the world watches the Church.

If we, as a Church, as followers of Jesus Christ, are to keep awake and watch for Jesus, our lives should reflect the burning urgency to which Jesus called his disciples on the Mount of Olives. It's a tough posture to be in, because it's as if we're called to be perpetually on our marks in the starting blocks of a race, just waiting, ever waiting for the starting gun to go off. This urgency is a call to look to the work of Christ as our foundation, in all of its self-sacrificing immediacy and divine longevity.

So let us not simply dismiss the urgency here as mere words written to a different context. Preparation can be good. Sustainability can be good. But as we labor on with diligence and with patience, may we also burn with the crackling fire of an urgent love.

Such is the task to which we, in the name of Jesus Christ, are called. So may we love urgently with joy and anticipation, and until He returns, keep awake.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.