

Staying Alert

Mark 13:24-37

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“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 the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: 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 he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Today marks the beginning of a new church year with the First Sunday in Advent. We have celebrated Christ the King and now we start the process over. But, instead of jumping to Jesus being born in a manger, we have to prepare ourselves for this event. Advent is the season of preparation and anticipation. It is a time of waiting!

How are you at waiting? Are you one of those people whose blood pressure rises when you are in a long line at the check-out counter of your favorite grocery store? And it gets worse – after an already long wait, the person at the front of the line needs a price check on an unmarked item. I have now come to the place where I check to see that everything has a barcode before I go to the register.

If you are tempted to switch lines, there was a study of line switching which showed that switching lines usually results in a longer wait. In fact, your chances of a longer wait are directly related to how many lines are available. If there are four lines, the odds are four to one for a longer wait – seven lanes means a seven to one chance of more delay. You get the idea. This is very bad news for people who hate waiting.

I have to confess that the issue of waiting is one of those areas of my life where God has richly blessed me with an opportunity for much growth! Just remember your prayer for patience the next time you find yourself waiting, God is answering your prayer!

Yet – waiting is a central part of life. When you think about it, we spend a huge chunk of our lives waiting; wait to hear about a job, waiting to hear from the doctor, waiting for a call from our teenager or waiting for the “other shoe” to drop in our life!

But there is a more insidious kind of waiting. A waiting that almost escapes our attention in spite of the fact that it eats away at the meaning of our lives. This toxic waiting is reflected in a story I heard years ago.

A little boy could not wait to get to high school. The high school kids seemed to have so much fun. Once he got to high school however, he noticed that the people, like his sister, who had gone off to college were having more fun than he was. He could not wait to get to college. But college seemed to drag on after a time and he was tired of all the homework. He couldn't wait to get out of school, get a job and make some money. When he got his first job, it seemed as though people who were really happy were the ones with a wife or husband, a couple of children and a home with a back yard – maybe even a family dog. But once he was married and had two children and a mortgage and a dog, he envied those couples whose children had gone away to college. They had so much more time for each other. Finally his children had left for college. But now the burden of a mortgage and tuition for two children was very heavy and he couldn't wait to be out of debt, pay off his house and retire. Then he could have some real fun like all those people who move to Arizona and play golf every day. Then one day – in the early winter of his life – standing at the tee of the 18th hole of the golf course near his home in Phoenix – he thought to himself, "What's the point?"

This poor fellow waited his life away, waiting for the next experience, but never being able to enjoy any of them.

Advent is about God identifying with the human situation. God came in the form of human flesh and lived among us. Paul worded it this way in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that through his poverty you might become rich,”

He came to earth in the form of a person, born into a peasant family. His Christmas wrapping was not one of tinsel and paper but of human flesh. His very name, Emmanuel, means God with Us.

Because God lived among us, there is no feeling, no experience that you can encounter, that God does not understand. He went through the loneliness of Gethsemane, the betrayal at the Mount of Olives, the weeping at the death of Lazarus, the temptations of the wilderness, the joy of the wedding at Gethsemane, the pain of seeing his mother suffer while he was on the cross. Don't tell me that God does not understand. I don't care what you have encountered; God has been there first.

In the embrace of family and friends, God is there. In the suffering of children who are the victims of violence, God is there. No night is so dark that God's light will not shine. No place is so barren, that new life cannot emerge. No person is so lost or weak that they cannot be exalted.

Secondly, advent is about getting ready for the return of Christ. Jesus put it this way, "What I say to you I say to all: Keep Watch!" Keep watch. Be prepared for his return. In a word: Repent. It is a busy time of the year. Choirs are rehearsing Christmas music; sanctuaries are decorated with poinsettias, Chrismon trees, and candles. Children are preparing for pageants. Pastors are busy preparing for worship. It is a busy and exciting time of the year.

Everything we do is marked by the steady march of time. Seconds lead to minutes to hours to days to weeks to years to decades to centuries.

The problem for all of us is that the clock is always running the wrong way, and we simply cannot stop its precipitous crawl toward the next tick. We lose moments to the past, out of our reach, never to be regained.

The kids have grown and gone. We're muddling along in a career, making a living, just existing out of habit more than anything.

The Greek language has a couple of words that mean "time." The first is most familiar -- chronos. It means the chronology of days, governed by the carefully calculated earth's sweep around the sun. God himself ordained this measurement of days on the fourth day of Creation, spinning the heavenly lights "*for seasons, and for days and years.*"

But another word for time is also used in the New Testament -- kairos. This speaks more to specific, God-ordained times throughout history, sometimes called the "right time" or "appointed season" (Titus 1:3). Kairos is God's dimension—one not marked by the past, the present, or the future.

When Jesus came, it was a fulfillment of promises past, a cosmic collision of the sacred and secular. It was an intersection of the holy will of God and the stubborn ways of man. It was a perfect moment. John the Baptist said "time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."

This godly *kairos* pierced its way into creation at just the right time, slicing through *chronos* with a cry of a baby in a manger.

Kairos moments then—and now—allow us to get a glimpse of the "other side." We peek around the corner at eternity. We actually glimpse how God works.

As the omniscient, omnipresent Deity, God is not bound by the confines of space or time. That's why He flows into our existence when we least expect Him. When we ask for something right away, it might not always come or when we don't ask at all. But he shows up. It can be frustrating, "*with the Lord one day is as a thousand years.*" It can also be surprising "*a thousand years as one day.*" (II Pet 3:8).

We should always live our days looking for those moments, those inexplicable times when His will and his way intersect with our daily walks.

And they can happen anytime! A friend calls you out of the blue to give a good word. A child's innocent joy pierces a long, hard day of struggle. A coworker takes a moment to lend a hand. God is always surprising us with his perfect, *kairos* timing.

Am I ready, waiting, and watching for him to move in my life?

At Advent, God looked down upon his dying people, dying from sin and distraction, pride and preoccupation. How, under the circumstance could he send a substitute? He came himself—in the person of Jesus Christ. Advent is about repentance and salvation.

Here's the big thing about waiting – and trust me – this is from a person who has not always been the most patient or productive of "waiters". Waiting is going to be a major issue in all of our lives, for all of our lives.

It brings us to the one of the most important paradoxes of the Gospels. We, at the beginning of the Advent Season, find ourselves in the Already-Not Yet. “*Already* Jesus has established the means through which we are drawn into relationship with God, but *not yet* do we live in complete communion with God. *Already* the realm of God is evident, but *not yet* is that realm fully established.”

It is not whether we are going to go through a lot of waiting in our lives, but how we are going to wait. Isaiah has the most important clue. "They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." The flip side of this is, "Those who wait without the Lord shall wear themselves out!"

"Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come... or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

"Lord, as I find myself waiting once again, may I wait upon you for the gift of meaning in my life!"

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. West Minister John Knox Press. 2011. Page 22-25.

Schwizer, Eduard. The Good News According to Mark, Westminster John Knox Press, 1970.

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www.lectionarysermons.com/nov28=99.html

www.thehighcalling.org/family/living-kairos-life-chronos-world

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