

November 3, 2017  
"Ready When You Are"  
Rev. Dr. John Ross  
Scripture Mark 13:32-37

Well, there's nothing quite like a good Christmas Bible passage to kick off the Advent Season, and that (Mark 13:32-37) is nothing like one. Were you listening? I hope you were listening because that can't be right. Mark 13 cannot be how we start the Advent Season. "Stay awake?" "Be alert?" "We don't know what time it will come." Are you kidding me? Keep Awake! The last thing we need this time of year is to stay awake anymore. What I think – okay, speaking for myself – what I need is a little more sleep. I need some rest. I need some down-time. I need a break from the parties and the shopping and the meals and the visitors in our home and the late night football games. I need some sleep. I don't want to keep awake. And then, be alert because we don't know when the time will come. Really? Really? We're surrounded by countdowns to Christmas, from the Advent calendars in our homes that we matriculate every single day to the candle in our sanctuary that we count down – "four, three, two, one, lift-off" – to every store and web site that has its little "countdown to Christmas" in it. You know. You've seen it. They'll count down the days, hours and minutes to Christmas, and we don't know, according to scripture, when it will come? Seems someone got the wrong scripture mixed up here today.

That can't be the scripture reading for the first Sunday in Advent. Can it? Well, let's back up for a minute here. You can reach for a Bible and do this with me. We can go to Mark 13 and see if we can figure this out. Maybe we just need to back up a little bit. Maybe my good friend Mark Reed got a little ahead of himself in the scripture reading this morning. Is that possible? Maybe he was supposed to start from the passages that said, "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." What in the world does a fig tree or summer have to do with Christmas? So, that can't be it. Maybe we just back up a little further in Mark 13 to verse 24 where it is written, "but in those days and 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." No sun? No moon? Stars are falling, not rising? Sounds more like REM's song, *It's the End of the World As We Know It*, not the first Sunday in Advent. There's no Virgin Mary. There's no over-crowded inn. There's no stable, manger or traveling magi.

But, it is right. It is the prescribed Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent in the world wide common lectionary. How could it be so? It's such a strange passage to have on such an important day, even our reading from Isaiah for the candle, and the invitation is to do the opposite, not to stay awake and be alert, but to settle in. What makes it even stranger is that this is Jesus speaking. Those were the words of Jesus that Mark read a moment ago. It's Jesus as a grown man having a private conversation with Peter, James, John and Andrew, and all with the secular and political import with Jerusalem as the backdrop to their little confab. Jesus in this moment gives them a little trifecta of a teaching session. First of all, he gives them a little prophecy. He drops a little Isaiah and Joel on them. He pulls from the Hebrew Scripture and lays it out them before the four of them, and then he moves into an object lesson, the second move he makes in this trifecta. He does an object lesson with a fig tree. And, then, his third move is his favorite. He tells a parable, which is what Mark read – the parable of a man who

goes on a journey and leaves his home and puts his servants in charge, each with their own work to do and one and one person on the look-out.

Fascinating passage for Advent. You know, Jesus is reaching back with that prophecy, with those words from the Hebrew prophets. It's a nod to the past. It seems to me the fig tree is a lesson about the present moment. What he says about the leaves, he says, when you see those leaves, it'll tell you that it's summertime, and the parable of the home owner who leaves his servants in charge directs our attention to the future. Beware, keep alert, stay awake. You better watch out. You better not cry, you better not pout. Now, let me tell you why.

The past, present and future combine and contract into the great "already but not yet" that is the Advent season. The "already but not yet" of this time leading up to Christmas. The "already but the not yet." We already know Jesus. He was born 2017 years ago, roughly. We set our clocks and our calendars by it. We already know Jesus, but we're told that he's not yet here, that we're supposed to be preparing and readying ourselves for something that we already have. It's such an odd conflation and confusion of time. It reminds me of the only show that I watch on TV right now, NBC's *This Is Us*. With powerful performances and brilliant script-writing, this show weaves together the past and the present and the future of the Pearson family. The life and times of complex characters jump from 1975 to 1985 and back to 1977, forward to 1997 and on up to 2010 and so on and countless moments in between. In any given episode you have to be willing and able to simultaneously hold the past, the present and the future, all without knowing what is coming next or to even fully understand what you're waiting for, and in those ways it's a lot like the "already but not yet" season of Advent.

We know this story from the past. We seek to be in the present moment as best we can, but we're called to prepare and get ready for something yet to come. We hear it, year after year, and in one moment, it keeps on our toes sort of wondering, "What will this year bring?" Or, "How is this year already different from last year?" But in the next moment, it's more like the trains that roll through Wayzata becoming so familiar to us that we stop even noticing them. As children, we're fascinated by the "already but not yet" of Christmas, but as adults, let's be honest, we hear the minister at church sounding a lot more like the boy who cried wolf. Even with words as dramatic as those of Jesus in Mark 13, we risk missing the point and the gift.

With all this combining this past week, I remembered a funny story about the famous film maker Cecil B. DeMille. Many of you would have appreciated his work in the first half of the last century, decades before any of the technology and the work people like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg would do later. Cecil B. DeMille had to work just with the natural settings in which he tried to produce these epic films, the last one of which, most likely his most famous, *The Ten Commandments* – right? Well, the story goes, he was making this other film, and the plan was to have one army ride down out of one hillside and another army ride down another hillside and clash in the middle of this big field, and it would be this big epic battle, and there'd be dust flying everywhere, and all this kind of stuff going on, but he needed thousands of extras, thousands of actors. He needed all the horses and the setting to be just right, but most of all, Cecil B. DeMille (or as his friends referred to him just as CB), what CB needed more than anything was for the light to be just right.

So, he got them all set up- right? - thousands of extras and actors set up before dawn every day, waiting for the light to be just right, and if it wasn't right in the morning, they'd hang around all day and see if it was right at night, and this went on for days – get 'em all together, get 'em

already to go, but the light's not right. It became weeks. Then, finally one morning, it came. The light was just right, and using his radio to call each of his three camera crews because Demille wasn't going to miss the shot. He had redundancy. He had three camera crews. Ready, action, and it all happened just as planned. The light was just right. The acting was perfect, and when he said, "Cut," and jumped on his radio, he called the first camera crew and said, "Talk to me." He said, "Sorry, Mr. Demille, but some dust kicked up just as the action began, and we lost most of what we were trying to capture." He said, "That's okay," gets on the radio and calls the second crew and says, "Talk to me," and they said, "Sorry to report, Cecil, but the camera broke just as you called action. We didn't get anything," and he gets on the radio to and he calls his third and final camera crew and says, "Talk to me," and from the other end of the radio comes the response, "Ready when you are, CB."

You see how even when we think we know what we are waiting for, and even when we have all the cues, and even when we have the radio calls, we can miss it. We can miss the call to action because dust comes up in our lives, and cameras break, but the greatest risk of all is that we haven't done our own work of being ready, of being actively waiting, and we miss the point. We miss the moment. We miss the gift.

So, in this context of "already but not yet" and with the cautionary words of Jesus to keep alert, to keep awake, I propose a single question to you this morning, and I'll close with this. I propose a single question to you that I would hope and pray that you can remember to ask yourself at least once a day during this whole season, just this one simple question. What are you waiting for? What are you waiting for? It's one part a call to action – right? What are you waiting for? It's sort of like when your friends were in the pool down below you, swimming around, and you were up on the high dive with your toes hanging over the end of that diving board, and your friends were calling up to you, "What are you waiting for?" There's a little bit of that, but much, much more importantly, this is a literal question, a direct question that I'm asking you to ask yourself each and every day, to be asked and answered for the face value of it alone. "WHAT are you waiting for?"

Are you waiting for Christmas, or are you waiting for the Christ? Now, before you think, "What's the difference?" Oh, there's a big difference between Christmas and the Christ. What are you waiting for? Are you waiting or getting ready for Christmas because that's just a single day on the calendar, a moment in time, easily missed, like any of the three camera crews of Cecil B. Demille. Christmas is a religious holiday, but let's face it. It has been hi-jacked by a consumer culture. Christmas, intended to be a time of preparation and repentance and Advent, has been turned into cartoon characters from the North Pole. Like every other holiday of the year, it's the same thing over and over again if we let it be that, or it can be like the trains rolling through Wayzata that you only notice until the gate drops down right in front of your car.

Are you waiting for Christmas, or are you waiting for the Christ? If you're waiting for the Christ and getting ready for the Christ, it's not just a moment in time, but a lifetime of loving God by loving and serving other people. If you're getting ready for the Christ, it's not a holiday measured by the metrics of consumer sales, but an invitation to a relationship that places ultimate value on things like faith, hope and forgiveness. If you're waiting for and getting ready for the Christ, this is not a cartoon character, but the very living and loving God who came to dwell among us, the Incarnation, Emanuel, which means "God with us."

These confounding words of Jesus, himself, from this morning, whether out of place or not, they put us in the right mind set, a readiness, and active engaged waiting with purpose, whether you're in a season of great joy, or on this day you have a deep sense of sorrow. When we intentionally wait for the Christ, what we're really doing is saying to God, "Ready when you are, God. I'm ready when you are."

Let us pray. Gracious and loving eternal God, help us to ask and answer a simple question every day for the ways that it might reshape this season and reshape our lives, and in time, dare we say and pray, shape this world of yours. We ask all this in the name of the one we come to celebrate, even Jesus. Amen.