

First Sunday in Advent  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
29 November 2020

Mark 13:24-37

Trying to stay awake on purpose is extremely difficult. I remember my early days as Psychiatric Social Worker at a Trauma 3 Center, working overnights. The main challenge to the job was not over-working, the drugged out patients, or even the traumatic events of inhumanity I witnessed as I counseled victims of rape, failed suicide attempts, or people going through Psychiatric breakdowns. The toughest part of the job was keeping awake, staying alert, forcing the senses to be sharpened at moments when every pore of my body demanded rest.

Today Jesus tells his disciples to stay awake because nobody, not even Jesus himself, knows when the end will come. It is interesting that the Lectionary writers give us Chapter 13 of Mark as we begin the story of Jesus Christ according to Mark on this the First Sunday of Advent. It is almost as though we are starting at the end. The focus today is not about who Jesus is, where he came from, who his family is, what his mission entails, or any other typical theme that would mark the beginning of a story. We don't start with "Once Long time ago," or even "The beginning of the story of Jesus Christ." We begin with a description of the end of days, a warning about the day of judgement, and imperative statements to stay awake and watch out for the signs of the end.

I see the wisdom in starting the story at Chapter 13. This chapter, more than any other section of Mark gives us valuable insights as to the reason for the writing of the gospel. You may remember that Mark is the first Christian Gospel to be written. Up until now the "Proclamation" of the Gospel took the form oral traditions and the letters of Paul and the Apostles. But now Mark sees the need to commit the events of the life of Jesus to writing. Why? There are several reasons:

1. Nearly 35 to 40 years after the death of Jesus, some preachers were claiming to be Jesus returned, leading some astray. (Mark 13:6, 21-22). Whereas story-telling was sufficient before, writing an accurate record of Jesus' actions and words becomes necessary to combat these false teachers.
2. By the year 66-70 many of the original Apostles and first-witnesses of Christ had been martyred or had died of natural causes. Additionally, many Believers were being persecuted and arrested (Mark 13: 9-13). The loss of the authority represented by these first witnesses necessitated the creation of another reliable source of authority. For Mark, a written Gospel was this source.
3. Mark 13:14 mentions a "desolating sacrilege" that had taken place. This most likely was an image of the emperor placed within the confines of the Temple. The Gospel assumes that the Temple is still standing, which means that the Gospel was written before the year 70, when the Romans destroyed the Temple for ever. Having a written account of Jesus's prophecies about persecution and the destruction of the Temple would provide much needed hope to a community under duress.

Mark's community is under attack on two fronts: Aggressive recruiters on one side and the might of the Roman authorities on the other. By the year 60 various groups (Like the Zealots) had began to organize an insurrection against Rome. By the time the Gospel is written between the year 68 and 70 many revolutionary recruiters were actively targeting members of the Church. On the other hand, since the great fire in Rome in the year 64 (Caused by the Emperor Nero, but blamed on the Christians) the Roman authorities had mounted a systematic campaign against Christians, which had caused the Church the loss of hundreds of lives. Mark refuses either side, reminding his people that only God knows when the end will come and that the role of the believer is not armed revolution, as much as it is watchfulness and preparation. The disciples have to look at the signs of the end and be ready. The signs are simple to see: "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" (13:24-26). A bit earlier on he also said or implied that some of these signs are, "wars and rumors of wars; nations rising up against nations; earthquakes, famines" (13:7-8).

Many religious people have seen these signs in almost every generation since Christ's resurrection. Many have thought that the end was imminent because of earthquakes, wars, or periods of severe famine. There have been Christian groups and cults that have gone through extreme measures to pinpoint the actual date and time of Christ's return. I believe, however, that the signs have always been with us from the very beginning of creation. These signs are with us today. We have famine in parts of Africa, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, conflicts with Iran, and other armed conflicts around the globe. We have had severe natural disasters this year like multiple hurricanes, severe fires out west, and a worldwide Pandemic. In fact, the signs are so severe, that many have wondered if 2020 is the beginning of the famous birth pains that mark the end of the times. I want to remind you, however, that prophesies about the end have always been popular in our history, and they remain popular even today.

This is precisely Mark's point. The signs are all around us and, because they are, today is the day of preparation. Today is the day to stay awake and vigilant. The preparation can not be delayed to an event yet to come that will mark the beginning of the end. The preparation has to begin today. The Son of Man could come this very hour. His angels may already be in flight, gathering his faithful ones. The point is that we don't know when this will be. And because we don't know the day or the time, we have no choice but to prepare now, here, today. We must live each second as though it might be our last here on earth, because in fact it may be our last.

Beware and keep alert! These are the two postures believers need to assume as we await for the coming of our Savior. But, my friends the Gospel passage does not end here. There is something else we must do. Jesus tells the parable of a master who leaves on a journey and gives authority to his servants to take care of his affairs until he returns. We are not just asked to be alert and watchful and to look for signs. We are also asked to engage fully in our Master's affairs. We are given authority to handle his business. In fact, the best way to prepare for the Day of the Lord is by taking care of the Master's business. We have authority to do his bidding, manage his affairs, and advance his agenda.

Our master's agenda is none other than the salvation of the whole world in his Son, Jesus Christ. We are to advance his kingdom by preaching the Gospel of Jesus to the ends

of the earth. There is a second integral part to the Master's agenda, however. We are to take care of the least of his children. While we wait, we remain watchful, but we also remain fully engaged in mission and evangelism. We discharge the authority he has given us by loving others, taking care of the least of his children, preaching the Gospel of his Son and remaining actively engaged in the advancement of his kingdom.

Staying awake is very difficult! We are to encourage each other to wakefulness and we are to engage in Christian mission and evangelism. This is the only way to prepare today, this very day, because the signs are all around us, and the end my come very soon.

May God give us the courage and the desire to do his will. Amen!