



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Keep Awake

Mark 13:24-36

**²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.**

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷Then 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.

²⁸“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. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, 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, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Two days before the big football game with the school rival the head football coach received an e-mail from the academic dean informing him that the star quarterback had been declared academically ineligible to play. Needless to say, the coach dropped what he was doing and headed to the dean's office. He burst into the room without knocking, demanding to know why his All-American quarterback would not be able to play. What horrible timing, two days before the game with the rival school and one which would determine which team would be bowl eligible!

The dean kept his cool and explained that the quarterback was caught cheating on a History exam. The coach knew that could not be and insisted on seeing the evidence. "Well, coach," the dean explained, "it seems as though Ralph the Quarterback sat next to the best student in the class to take the exam, and when the exams were graded Ralph the Quarterback had given the exact same answers as the 'A' student, word for word on all ten questions."

"That doesn't prove anything, and you cannot keep our quarterback from playing on circumstantial evidence. Who knows? Ralph may have spent the day in the library studying, and your 'A' student may have slacked off and in a panic he copied off Ralph."

The dean then said, "Well, that could be except for the key evidence that came on the final question. The 'A' student wrote under question 10, 'I don't know.' And Ralph the Quarterback wrote, 'I don't know either.'"

I remember this time of year when I was a student at SFA. I would go home for Thanksgiving, enjoy some time with my family, and then head back to Nacogdoches for the final weeks of the semester. During the previous three months of the semester I spent much time playing intramural football, enjoying the company of my friends, going to football games, and playing dominos, bumper pool and spades at the BSU, but now it was time to pay the piper. Needless to say, I was behind and finals were around the corner.

My first couple of years at SFA I pulled, too many times, what is infamously called an "all-nighter." When I showed up for the final I was in no condition to take a test. However, I always appreciated the Profs who gave

multiple choice tests. On those test, I was almost guaranteed to get 20% of the questions I didn't know. The answer was right there in front of me that was unless the professor used as one possibility "None of the above." I hated it when they did that. Even when I thought I knew the answer, and ruled out the other possibilities, that answer, "none of the above," left open an infinite possibility of other answers.

I get the feeling that in this text from Mark 13, Jesus was preparing Christian disciples for the final exam, but the problem, at least for disciples, was that Jesus did not know the answer to the question that was foremost on their minds. It was like the "none of the above." Jesus told his disciples what the incorrect answers were. He helped them recognize wrong thinking about the end times, but he couldn't answer their question, "When will these things take place?"

Mark 13 begins with our Lord and his disciples leaving the Temple, when one of the disciples was impressed with the massive stones that made the large buildings of the Temple. Jesus said, "**Do you see these stones, not one will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down.**"

Now within this context we have a collection of Jesus' apocalyptic sayings about two different and distinct events. The first is the coming destruction of Jerusalem which happened in A.D. 70, and the other event is the second coming of Christ.

The difficulty in interpreting the rest of Mark 13, including the text I read earlier, is trying to understand what event Jesus was speaking about in any particular sentence. At one point he seems to be referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, then in the next sentence it appears Jesus is talking about the Day of the Lord. And, of course, history is filled with folks who have tried to use these sayings, along with other passages of Scripture, to predict a date for the end of time.

Speaking of the "none of the above" answer, Jesus couldn't tell us when the things of which he spoke would happen, but he wanted his followers to recognize the wrong answers. In verses 3-9 Jesus said, "**You will hear of**

wars and rumors of wars. Many false messiahs will come. There will be natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, but don't be alarmed."

One of the most interesting texts in Mark 13 begins with verse 14: **"But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not be, then those in Judea must flee to the mountains."** This verse seems to refer to the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

The desolating sacrilege stuff is a direct reference to the Book of Daniel. During the days when the book of Daniel was written, the Greek ruler Antiochus was dead set on destroying the Jews. During his occupation of Jerusalem, Antiochus desecrated the Temple when he had the flesh of swine sacrificed on the altar. And in the holy places of the Temple, Antiochus had a statue of Zeus erected and ordered the Jews to bow down to worship it on the pain of death. He did this in, of all places, the Temple.

Some three hundred years later, that is in A.D. 70, almost 40 years after Jesus had been raised, the Romans were on the march under the Roman General Titus and Jerusalem found itself under siege, and the temple was desecrated as it had been under Antiochus, then torn down for the last time. When the Romans arrived, according to the historian Josephus, over one million people (probably an exaggerated number) piled into Jerusalem, seeking safety behind its walls. However, there were Christians who heeded Jesus' warnings and rather than running to Jerusalem for safety, they fled to the mountains. Most of the folks who sought protection behind the walls of Jerusalem perished from starvation. However, many Christians were spared. They heeded Jesus' warning and fled to the mountains. They dispersed themselves throughout the Roman Empire, taking the gospel with them wherever they went.

In the final three paragraphs in Mark 13, we have a group of saying from our Lord concerning the end of time, or the Day of the Lord, or some may want to refer to it as the second coming of Christ. And when Jesus was asked when this event would take place, he was quite clear. He said, "I don't know." And for this reason, if you were to ask me when Jesus will return my answer will

be, “I don’t know either.” Isn’t it interesting that limited in a human form, Jesus was not omniscient? He simply did not know.

In the text I read, you can see how Jesus moved from one topic (the Second Coming), to another topic (the Fall of Jerusalem), then back to the first topic (The Second Coming). This happened because Mark, believing that the two events would take place at the same time, intertwined Jesus’ teaching when he made his compilation of Jesus’ apocalyptic words.

In the text Jesus began with the Second Coming. The sun darkened, the moon did not give light, stars fell from the sky, and the Son of Man came in the clouds sending out his angels to gather his elect.

The text then turned back to watching for the signs of the fall of Jerusalem which again happened in A.D. 70. Like the fig tree gives evidence that summer is near, watch for the signs of the coming Roman army, then flee to the mountains. Jesus warned that this would come soon. It would happen before this generation passed away, so be on your guard. And when the Romans came in A.D. 70, those who listened to Jesus’ warning ran to the mountains.

Mark 13 closes with what appears to be a teaching about the Second Coming. Jesus had no clue when this would happen. But Jesus said, “Don’t follow false messiahs; don’t worry about wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. These will happen”. Jesus knew what the wrong answers were. He gave the “none of the above” selection. However, and this is a huge however, Jesus said, “Keep awake. I am going away; I am leaving you in charge of the house. You will not know, when I come back it will be evening, midnight, or dawn. Don’t be caught slacking. When I come, you need to be going about the business of the kingdom.”

This text, if it was summarized in one word, the word would be “faithfulness.” We are to be faithful always, for we cannot know when Jesus will return. I know, I know, we will always find folks trying to predict when the Lord will come, but it is not only foolish to try, it takes our focus off where

it should be. We are not to predict the coming, but we are to be faithful until he comes.

John Kennedy told a story when he was running for President: “The time was the 19th of May, 1780. The place was Hartford, Connecticut. The day has gone down in New England history as a terrible foretaste of Judgment Day. For at noon, the skies turned from blue to gray and by mid-afternoon had blackened over so densely that, in that religious age, men fell on their knees and begged a final blessing before the end came. The Connecticut House of Representatives was in session. And as some men fell down and others clamored for an immediate adjournment, the Speaker of the House, Colonel Davenport, came to his feet. He silenced them and said these words: ‘The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish, therefore, that candles may be brought.’”

I hope this Advent Season will awaken within us a certain expectation of Christ’s return, and a discipline to be found doing our duty when our Lord returns.

One of the wonderful benefits of having a new pastor on board is that Jennifer has come to us with some fresh ideas, and as you know, one of them was to recommend to this congregation that we consider using the devotional book *Advent in Narnia* to guide our devotions as individuals, families or in groups during this Advent season. So far, I have found the devotions to be wonderful aids to reflect upon during this Advent season.

If you are using this devotional book, it will help if you have read Lewis’s book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which is the first book in the Chronicles of Narnia. If you are a fast reader you can read the story in a couple of hours. If you are a slow reader like me, it may take a couple of days. Or, I think you can take a couple of hours and watch one of the several movies based on the book.

Narnia is the magical land that is under the spell of the White Witch and where it is always winter and never Christmas. Like our world today, all the

violence, hatred, hunger and other problems only seem to escalate, and we wait for Christ's return to bring peace and set up His kingdom. Yes, here in our world it seems like it is always winter even when it is 103 degrees outside. There was a rumor that Aslan the great lion who represents Jesus was on the move, and the snow was beginning to melt.

I want to read part of the twelfth devotion in the book *Advent in Narnia*. "The creatures in Narnia wait for Aslan with longing, and their expectation is contagious; the three children (all but Edmund) are delighted in spite of themselves when Mr. Beaver first mentions Aslan's name.

"Preparing ourselves to receive Jesus is about living our lives awake to hope, to love, and to our most needy neighbors. When ancient people wrote about apocalypse, what they describe sounds despairing and destructive, *like winter with no Christmas*, but if we look a little deeper, those writers were trying to turn their worry and fear into hope. They were choosing to stay awake. We too must not fall asleep or numb ourselves but keep faith that God's love in Christ is more powerful than a brutal world.

"As we wait for the coming of Jesus – at Christmas and on the Last Day – let us 'keep awake' and practice hope, love and justice as part of our daily lives. Not because we want to 'be good' or earn our place in heaven, but because by so doing we will stay alert enough to meet Jesus whenever he appears before us."

It was a fall day much like this one when the leaves were dropping big time, and I was in the den watching the television. My mom walked through and said, "Stephen." That what she named me and that is what she calls me. You can keep calling me Steve, but my mother calls me Stephen. She said, "Stephen, I am going to the church to do a few things, then I am going shopping and then run a few errands. I'm not sure when I will be home, but it will be late. While I'm gone;" (there was always a 'while I'm gone' when she left the house). She said, "While I am gone, please clean your room, then go rake the leaves in the back yard."

When she left I had three options. I could ignore my mother and go on watching television and waste a day, but there would be consequences to pay if I made that decision.

I could spend some time trying to figure out how long my mother would be at the church, and how long it would take her to drive to the grocery store, and based on her past history of errand running, try to determine how long that would take. Then I would calculate from these figures when she would return. Once I had an idea of when she was going to return, I could get out a lawn chair and sit in the driveway of our house and watch for her, so that when she arrived I would see the great and glorious event of her return. I have an idea she would not be too impressed if she saw me watching for her and my room was still a mess and leaves covered the back yard.

Now if I really wanted to impress her, if I wanted to make her happy, I could actually go to my room and clean it, then do the dishes, straighten things around the house, then go to the back yard and rake the leaves. I was not sure at what time she was going to return, but I did know that if I was doing what I was supposed to be doing in her absence, then on the occasion of her return there was going to be great rejoicing.

Who knows? She might even say, “Well done good and faithful son, enter into our clean home and I will fix a special dessert and supper for you.” Well, if she had said that, I would have thought that maybe she ran one too many errands, but you get the point.

What is our job? What should we be caught doing when our Lord returns? Sitting in our study, pouring over the Scriptures looking for the answer to the question, when will the Lord return? Which by the way, Jesus said is not there for us to find. Should we be sitting on the mountain looking to the East waiting to see the grand and glorious event? No, of course not.

What should we be caught doing? Well the answer is easy. In our worship, our study, in our work in the community, in our commitment to ease the suffering in the world, and in our witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as savior, we are to be about the tasks that our Lord has given us.

And so my brothers and sisters, as we wait for the Lord's return, which may be as early as the next moment, or as long as many millennia, may we be found doing what Christ has called us to do.