

## **Keep Awake!** Mark 13:24-37

### **A Surprise Guest Visit!**

Have you ever had a surprise guest visit on short notice? Last Saturday, my friend called me and said, that one of his friends sprained his wrist and he remembered that I was a certified hand acupuncturist. He asked for my help and they would come over in about 30 minutes, if I was available. Of course, I said, “Yes.”

When Juhee and I learned that we would soon have guest visitors, the first thing we had to do was clean the living room. You may assume that your pastor would keep an impeccably clean house and have everything perfectly organized all the time, but that’s not true. Juhee and I often put our clothes on the sofa and as time goes on, there are piles of clothes on the sofa and we sit on the floor! So, our first job was to put all those clothes into the bedroom before the guest’s arrival.

### **Time for Clean up!**

Normally, cleaning is the first step to preparing for guests. Advent is the time of preparation for the coming of a guest, an important guest. It’s time to clean up our mess and prepare ourselves and our church for the coming of our guest. Today’s scripture is a kind of wakeup call, saying that we have an important guest coming and we need to be ready.

What is it that we are waiting for? What are we looking for? During this time of year, we generally assume that we are waiting for the baby Jesus and we should get ready to celebrate Christmas. But the first reading for this first Sunday of Advent tells a little different story.

“In those days, after the 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.” (13:24-26)

This is not quite what we are expecting to hear in this season of joy and happiness. Right? But the scripture reminds us that what we are waiting for is not a manger or three wise men in search of a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. It’s not gingerbread houses, or gifts covered in shiny reflective red, green, and silver wrapping paper. What we long for is not a mere historical remembrance of Christmas or a family celebration, but a new reality, a new encounter! We are waiting for the coming of the risen Christ in glory! So the season of Advent is time to prepare ourselves to be ready for a new encounter with the living Christ through remembering God’s marvelous act of salvation on Christmas day!

### **Apocalyptic Text**

Preparing for Christmas is important. Decorating, poinsettias, setting-up the crèche, placing advent wreath with 4 candles are important, but the essence of Advent is not a mere historical remembrance of old news about the baby Jesus. Rather, Advent is a time of preparing and waiting for a new encounter with the living Christ in our daily lives.

This new encounter can be shocking like the moon losing its light and stars falling from heaven. Mark 13 is known as “the Little Apocalypse.” Jesus warned his disciples, “the difficult days are ahead. Watch for deception. Watch out for yourselves. In the face of impending calamity, stay awake!” This kind of message is not what we expect to hear during this season of joy and happiness, but this apocalyptic message surely challenges and shatters a familiar cultural message of Christmas in our society.

As we all know, many U.S. Holidays have religious origins but now many seem to have lost their religious meanings and merely become cultural celebrations. Along with Thanksgiving Day, Christmas is a good example. Cultural messages about Christmas are typically materialistic... something like “if you give your wife a piece of shiny jewelry, she will be happy! Happy wife! happy life!” As members of society we cannot completely escape from these negative cultural influences.

You must have heard the story of the boiling frog. “If a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if the frog is put in tepid water, which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death.” Of course, this is a myth. Scientists say, “Frog don’t boil but we might!” as they warn of global warming.

Our culture is like water we are in and our culture has shaped our understanding of the Christmas season. When I first came to the United States, I was very surprised that so many churches in the United States do not have Christmas worship service on Christmas Day. I thought of the United States as a Christian nation and everyone would gather at the church on Christmas morning for worship. But I was told that Christmas Day is a family day so people do not come to church. Perhaps, I was like a frog who had jumped into hot water and felt, not having Christmas Day worship was so strange. But, as my stay in the United States has gotten longer, I feel comfortable, not having a worship service on Christmas Day. This is just an example of how we are influenced by the society and culture we live in.

We, Christians, are not free from the destructive influence of the cancel culture, the politics of hate, racism, sexism, and many other forms of cultural domination and oppression. A real tragedy is that we gradually accept these structural evils as an inevitable part of life.

The function of the apocalyptic text is like ‘Shock therapy.’ It wakes us up from overlooking what really surrounds us. “Hey! Wake up! Don’t be a boiled frog!” The strange and somewhat intimidating apocalyptic image is a rude wakeup call for those who have fallen into a deep spiritual sleep.

### **Keep Awake!**

Jesus said, “But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So keep a sharp lookout, for you don’t know the timetable. I say to all: Keep awake.” We know our Christ is coming but we don’t know when so we have to keep awake! Keeping awake means that we do not blindly accept the dominant values of our society and culture as normal.

About 1,000 people are shot to death by the police each year and that’s not normal. Among those fatal shootings, the rate of Black Americans is much higher than that of any other ethnicity and that is not normal.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, about thirty-nine thousand people have died due to gun violence and that is not normal. While teenagers cannot legally buy cigarettes, they are able to legally buy assault rifles and that is not normal. “The 50 richest Americans have wealth equal to the poorest 165 million people” and that is not normal. While 35 million people in the United States struggle with hunger, about 40% of the food supply is tossed into the trash bin and that is not normal. There are so many abnormal things happening and we need to perceive them as abnormal. That’s what it means to watch and keep awake while we are waiting for the coming of the living Christ. Just like Jesus’ apocalyptic address, keeping awake..., knowing injustice is injustice may make us uncomfortable. But this is the first step of any recovery. We have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/585152/people-shot-to-death-by-us-police-by-race/>

problems! many problems! Only when we recognize our problems, can we start working for change.

Of course, all these messes we have created seem so huge that we may not be able to solve the problems. The good news is that the guest we are waiting for is not an inspector but the living Christ, our Savior. He will deliver us from all evils and redeem all of creation. This is the basis of our infinite hope. This is the reason we can continue to work to make this world a better place even if we may experience disappointment. Our savior is coming so keep up the good work!

Keeping awake also means to be attentive to discovering and perceiving God's mystery and wonder in the ordinary. Last Sunday was Thanksgiving Sunday. While Asbury UMC had a virtual worship service, Zion Korean UMC had an in-person worship service. During the worship service, we had special music by Zion music school students who had studied violin for 3 months. I would like to share a short video of them playing. [ppt] They played well. But what really made people smile was the little kid at the center. She is 5 years old and had learned violin for only 3 months. She doesn't even know how to read music yet.

Did you think she would make a beautiful sound? Honestly, she hadn't practiced this song, but she wanted to take part that morning, so she held her violin and played or pretended to play. All the people at the church laughed and gave them a big round of applause. That was God's gift to Zion KUMC last Sunday and a little kid was the messenger of the good news! God still works among us in various ways. Keep awake and be attentive to what God is doing. That will bring us joy, happiness and sustain our hope even in the midst of this unusual time.

My friends, keep awake! Our Christ is coming! It's time to clean up our lives and wait for our good friend and Savior! Keep awake and wait for the arrival of our Christ! Amen.