

UNIVERSITY UMC OF REDLANDS, CA

“KEEP AWAKE”

Mark 13:24-37¹

December 3rd, 2023 – First Sunday of Advent

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.

²⁶ “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels and gather the 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. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven 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. ³³ Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

¹ New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE). Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Introduction.

One of the teachings of the faith that I have very present in my life is the process of incubating the eggs that a hen goes through when she hatches her eggs to make way for a new generation of chicks.

Yes, a small animal whose brain is no bigger than a marble gives us an example of faith and hope.

Chickens can live up to 8 or 10 years, and even longer in optimal conditions. A hen must wait all 21 days of incubation, lying on the eggs, giving herself brief periods to eat.

Today's text teaches us about staying alert and faithful to the promises of our Lord Jesus Christ even though we don't understand all the things going on around us.

This chapter is often called 'The Little Apocalypse', based on its similarity to the Great Apocalypse of the Revelation of John.

Apocalyptic literature usually comes out of difficult times.

For example, the book of Daniel comes from the era (165 B.C.) when Antiochus Epiphanes profaned the temple and tried to impose pagan religious practices on the Jews.

The book of Revelation comes from the era (95 A.D.) when Christians were being persecuted because they refused to worship the emperor.

Apocalyptic literature usually reflects a strong dualism—good against evil. It presents dramatic visions full of symbols—numbers, colors, and animals, codes that must be explained or interpreted. It sees time, not as cyclic (as the Greeks thought of time), but as a linear movement toward God's final judgment.

It regards present troubles as mere birth pangs that will lead to the final consummation of God's reign. It holds out hope for the faithful who are suffering now, but who will receive a Godly reward in the end.

From the fig tree learn its lesson.

The church today is divided between Christians who await expectantly the return of the Son of Man and Christians who ignore this aspect of Jesus' teaching altogether.

This is the first of two mini-parables included in our Gospel lesson. The second is the man going on a journey (vv. 34-36).

Most of the trees in that part of the world are evergreen, but the olive and the fig are deciduous. The olive tree blossoms early, so it is not a trustworthy harbinger of summer.

The fig tree, however, blossoms late, so its blossoms promise that summer is just around the corner.

If this scene takes place near Passover, as seems likely, Jesus could be pointing to a blossoming fig as he says these words.

While Jesus' comments about the fig tree sound cryptic, he simply assures us that, as we see these signs taking place, "we are assured that the day of salvation for the elect is near"

But about that day or hour, no one knows.

"But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (v. 32).

In verse 30, Jesus seems to claim that the Son of Man will come soon, but in verse 32, he says that the Son does not know the day or hour.

Some claim that this is inconsistent, but a person can know a general time frame but not the exact day or hour.

It seems as if Jesus is saying that the Son of Man will return within the next few years or, at most, the next few decades.

That is troubling, because the Son of Man did not come in the expected way and time, and still has not come two thousand years later. There have been several attempts to resolve this problem:

Some scholars have suggested that "this generation" means Jewish people or humanity in general, but most reject this proposition.

For one thing, it stretches “this generation” beyond its apparent meaning. For another, it leads to a trite conclusion—that humans will be present when the Son of Man comes.

Some scholars have suggested that “all these things” refer to the destruction of the temple rather than the coming of the Son of Man. If so, the prophecy was fulfilled when the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.

However, “all these things” refers to the events that Jesus foretold in verses 5-23. According to this understanding, before the Son of Man returns (vv. 24-27),

The temple will be destroyed (v. 2),
There will be “wars and rumors of wars” (v. 7),
Persecution (vv. 9-13),
And they will see “the abomination of desolation” (v. 14).

While we tend to be troubled by the long period that has elapsed since Jesus foretold the coming of the Son of Man, we can understand it “as a sign of grace”—an extended period given by God so that people might have additional opportunities to repent.

When Jesus says, “Heaven and earth,” he means all creation. His words are derived from Isaiah 51:6 “for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, the earth will wax old like a garment” and Isaiah 40:8 “but the word of our God stands forever”.

“But my words will not pass away” (v. 31b). This is a bold claim, but one that has withstood the test of history.

Kingdoms have risen and waned and tyrants have done everything in their power to eliminate Christianity—but people from all walks of life and in every land still look to Jesus as Lord.

Keep awake.

In the Roman army, a guard could be executed for falling asleep on guard duty. While that sounds harsh, it reflects a harsh reality. Readiness is a matter of life and death. If a guard falls asleep, the enemy might breach the defenses and kill those whom the guard was charged to protect.

Spiritual alertness is as important as physical security.

We live in a world full of soul-killing temptations and distractions. We are regularly subjected to advertising that trivializes life –to friends who demand that we do scurrilous things –to movies that glamorize violence, drugs, and sex –and to a thousand tempters.

Even coaches, who at one time emphasized spiritual values, often schedule practice sessions on Sunday mornings, forcing youngsters to choose between sports and faith.

The list of tempters is endless. When we succumb to them, we (and our family and friends) suffer the consequences.

“Watch, keep alert,” Jesus warns. Good advice!

“for you don’t know when the time (Kairos) is” (v. 33). The Greek language has two words for time:

- Chronos has to do with chronological time. When we say that we will do something at a particular time, we are using Chronos time.
- Kairos has to do with a crucial time or a decisive moment—a pivotal point in history. When we talk about “missing the boat,” (by which we mean missing the opportunity of a lifetime), we are talking about kairos time.

“It is like a man, traveling to another country” (v. 34a). As noted above, verses 34-36 constitute a mini-parable about a master going away and charging his doorkeeper to be on the watch. God is the master, and we are his doorkeeper, charged with keeping watch.

“Watch therefore” (v. 35a).

The word *gregore* means to watch—to stay alert—to keep one’s eyes open and one’s attention focused.

Soldiers who have served in combat know the requirement well, especially those who have served on guard duty. There is nothing more difficult than keeping one’s eyes open and attention focused hour after hour after hour, night after night after night.

But soldiers on guard duty know that their faithfulness can be a matter of life and death, both for themselves and for their fellow soldiers.

Conclusion.

But in this verse, Jesus is emphasizing the danger of failure to be ready for his Second Coming—an emphasis that he repeats elsewhere.

“What I tell you, I tell all: Watch” (v. 37).

This is the point of the parable that Jesus’ disciples must “keep awake” to be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man.

Keeping awake, of course, does not mean that we must suffer chronic insomnia. Keeping awake has to do with spiritual wakefulness—spiritual preparation—spiritual readiness for Christ’s coming again.

But what constitutes wakefulness? What constitutes readiness?

What do we need to be doing when the Master comes so that he will be pleased with us?

“For whoever does the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother” (Mark 3:35), so we would do well to try to do God’s will.

When Jesus’ disciples argued about which one was greatest, Jesus said: “If any man wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all” (Mark 9:35b), so we would do well to adopt the posture of a servant.

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such little child in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me, doesn’t receive me, but him who sent me” (Mark 9:37), so we would do well to welcome children (and others who need care and supervision).

When Jesus’ disciples complained about an exorcist who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name, Jesus replied: “For whoever will give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you are Christ’s, most certainly I tell you, he will in no way lose his reward” (Mark 9:41), so we would do well to help those in need—and to do so in Christ’s name.

After James and John request the places of honor in Jesus’ kingdom, Jesus replied: “Whoever of you wants to become first among you, shall

be bondservant of all” (Mark 10:44), this repeats the emphasis on servanthood that we found in 9:35b above).

Jesus said, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father, who is in heaven, may also forgive you your transgressions” (Mark 11:25), so we would do well to practice forgiveness.

When the widow put her last two coins in the temple treasury, Jesus said: “Most certainly I tell you, this poor widow gave more than all those who are giving into the treasury, for they all gave out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, gave all that she had to live on” (Mark 12:43-44), so we would do well to give recklessly to God.

After the resurrection, Jesus said “Go into all the world and preach the Good News to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who disbelieves will be condemned”, so we would do well to believe and be baptized and preach the gospel to everyone next to us.

Amen.