

"Keeping Awake!"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Dec. 3, 2023

PLEASE READ:
Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

Did you see the recent article in the *New York Times* entitled, “You Deserve a Great Nap!”? It’s counter-intuitive, but according to Jade Wu, a sleep psychologist and researcher at Duke University, reports that a nap is “like a performance-enhancing drug without the drug part.” Yes, napping can help you think more clearly, react more quickly, boost your mood and improve your memory, she said.¹ But before any of you settle in for a quick snooze during this sermon, a good nap is supposed to help you to stay awake for what really matters, and that is what our gospel lesson is all about today...

On this first Sunday of Advent we read about the ultimate Advent, or final coming of the Messiah. "...In those days, following that distress, 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken... At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory... No one knows about that day or hour...Therefore keep watch... Keep awake!"

This portentous vision depicts the final judgment, the very end of history. It is a rather shocking teaching of Jesus that disturbs all of our merry-making in this festive season, perhaps a necessary antidote to what can be a toxic positivity during the holidays that can depress so many people. Every year at the beginning of the liturgical calendar, *we begin with the end*. The whole of Scripture and the creeds affirm, the Son of Man will come to judge the quick and the dead. There will be a final reckoning for all creation. And what appears to be so certain today, may look very different tomorrow...

When you look at the world headlines, whether about the wars between Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Hamas, the dubious legacy of Kissinger, or George Santos, or Omicron, or AI, or terrorist bombing in the Philippines, or racism and bigotry, or our indifference to climate change... judgement begins to sound rather *apropos*; the final wrath of God seems timely. We try and joke about it with cartoons about God looking down at earth, with the caption, “Don’t make me come down there!” but for all of the beauty and goodness in our world, we of the Judeo-Christian faith unflinchingly confess the brokenness of our world, our communities, our lives. We echo Isaiah’s cry, "How can *we* be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...like the wind our sins sweep us away..."

¹ Alice Callahan, “You Deserve a Great Nap” (*New York Times*, Nov. 23, 2023).

It's also counter-intuitive, but Advent *always* begins with this apocalyptic warning, and then calls us to wait. *Hurry up, wait!* In this hustle bustle season, we are called to wait for that final day when we come to stand before God to experience the final word of love and justice. It seems strange to wait, but we are called to take time for sabbath rest, to light a candle, to pray. We stop all of our running around in order to be alert to what is truly important in life: We stop to affirm that history is moving toward a God-designed, God-timed completion when Christ's reign of love and justice will consummate salvation history. We wait with certainty that Christ will come, yet we know not when.

In the tension of time, how do we wait? According to Jesus, we must be attentive: "Be on guard! Be alert!" Whatever form of fatigue you may be in, Jesus says abruptly, "*gregoreite!*" "Wake up!" We are called to live with purpose and intentionality, for each moment matters. We are to live each day because we know God is on the loose, expecting God to show up on our doorstep. I love the story of Martin Luther when asked what he would do today if he were told that tomorrow would be the end of the world. "I'd plant a tree."

Jesus, in fact, focuses us on the tender shoots of a fig tree, and its emerging leaves. It's a reference to Spring, which reminds us that while this world will have an end, a new heaven and new earth where all is as it should be is emerging. We need to be watching and be ready, not in fear, but in hope that "help is on the way." The question is, how then shall we live?

Perhaps the best way to focus in on what's really important as we begin a new year together, is to stop long enough to admit that too much of what we think will last is but a mist, a fog that will be burned away in the light of God's love and justice. Maybe the only way to see our lives clearly is to confess we too often major in the minors. Too much of our striving is for naught. What matters is God's grace, in the end. Jesus puts our future squarely into the hands of God. John Calvin writes, "For though the church be now tormented by the malice of men, or even broken by the violence of the billows, and miserably torn to pieces, so as to have no stability in the world, yet we ought always to cherish confident hope, because it will not be by human means, but by heavenly power...the Lord will *gather* his Church."

Isaiah 64 is one of the most poignant prayers in the scriptures. The prophet reminds us not only of who we are, but of who God is: "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you..." This awesome God of power makes the mountains tremble but comes to help those who gladly do what is right and remembers God's ways. Isaiah recalls that although we are nothing on our own, God cares for us as a Father for his children. "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Look upon us, we pray, for

we are all your people."

And so Jesus calls us to wake up to the fact that the apocalypse, the final coming, is about revealing to us what *is* important, and what *is* ultimate. The term "woke" has a checkered past in recent years. "Woke" is an adjective derived from African American Vernacular English meaning "alert to racial prejudice and discrimination." In the last dozen years or so it came to apply to a broader awareness of social inequalities such as racial justice, sexism and LGBTQ rights. So, staying awake is not just a personal but social issue for Christians. We are called to see the world as it *really is*, and to imagine the world as it is *supposed to be* and work to realize the vision of a new heaven and a new earth however we can.

As we begin another year together by dining at this table, we are confronted with the paradox that we are first to rest in the hope that is ours in the ultimate coming of our Lord Jesus, who will redeem and restore all creation. There may even be a good nap here, in that we can receive God's grace only by faith. But this bread and this cup should also alert us to what really matters, focus us again on the Kingdom priorities of the Beloved Community, the love and justice of Jesus for all people. Here we are reminded that the Good News about the final *coming* of Christ is that God's final *judgment* has already been meted out. In eating this bread and drinking this cup, we claim and proclaim God's grace, and commit to living into God's love and justice for all people until Christ comes again.

Friends, come to this table and be reminded again that in Christ, the Lord is coming to meet you where you are with love and justice, and calling you to wake up to the fact that God's love and justice is for all people! So, light a candle. Pray. Wait with joyful anticipation! Watch with holy expectation. Listen with hopeful preparation. May even your Advent napping help you to keep awake! Our Savior is coming again when we least expect it. Be ready to receive and share God's hope, peace, joy and love!

In the name of One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. AMEN.