

A Wake-up Call!
November 27, 2011

Mark 13:24-37

Mark Twain once called on a certain young lady in Hannibal, MO. He was late getting off work. By the time he got to the livery stable to rent a horse and buggy, the only animal left was a very old, bony, swayback, scraggy, bedraggled-looking horse. He arrived at the young lady's home much later than anticipated. Furious, the young lady made him wait 35 minutes.

When she finally appeared she glanced out the window, saw the horse and said, "Is that the best you could do?" --- Mark went to the window, gasped and said, "I can't believe it! When I got here that was a spry, young colt!"

The season of Advent begins today. It is traditionally known as the season of waiting, of anticipation of the coming of Christ Jesus into our lives.

Mostly, we are an impatient society. We have become accustomed to instant gratification and get very impatient and disgruntled when we have to WAIT!

When I was in college, registration day was dreaded --- mostly, we stood in lines, all sorts of lines - one for each class, several more for drop-add, yet another to get your advisor's signature and on and on. What we learned from this experience was to wait.

Most college students today have it very easy when it comes to registering for classes. Just a few clicks on the computer and presto, you're registered / no waiting.

We still have lines, of course: lines at the bank, lines at the grocery store, lines at Walmart, lines of traffic at stop lights, lines of chairs in the doctor's or dentist's office. Many, probably most of us endure wait with a lot of impatience.

The sadness of waiting comes when we lose the excitement of anticipation to the dreariness of reality. We've all known the sense of loss and disappointment over something we waited for that did not happen or a hoped-for future that does not come quickly enough.

Even Christmas day has its own measure of disappointment. The packages are opened, the gifts admired and put away. The tree comes down; the manger scenes put away for another year and often the long-awaited day passes with a sense that nothing has happened. We have waited, and waited and it's gone and nothing has really changed.

We could almost describe this as a type of sleep-walking -- just going through the motions without being aware of our surroundings, ignoring the wonder and joy.

Today's gospel reading might at first seem strange for the first Sunday of Advent. I mean why talk about the second coming when we are preparing to celebrate the first coming? But this reading gives us a clear call to stop our sleep-walking and wake up.

While manger scenes pop up all over town, at least where they are still allowed, and Christmas carols fill the airwaves, this reading from Mark's gospel gives us a different vision of the coming Lord.

According to Mark, we can forget the stable, the star, the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. When Mark looks into the sky, what he sees are cosmic fireworks: a darkened sun, a dim moon, stars falling from the sky like sparks from a sparkler – and there, in the center of the smoke, the Son of God coming in clouds with great power and glory.

It is a vision of the end time, the final coming of the Lord when the world as we know it will become mere fuel for the world God has been trying to give us all along.

We have refused that world, for the most part. Like the prophets before him, Jesus spent his whole life describing it to us, but it turned out to be much more difficult than anyone had imagined.

It involved way too much togetherness, for one thing – not just worshiping with other people but actually living in community with them, making decisions together, pooling resources, holding each other accountable, with no permission to leave certain people out because they were too brusque, too gushy, too left, or too right.

The way Jesus described it, it was a world in which nothing could be taken for granted. God could be anywhere, in anyone. If you went to sleep for even 15 minutes, you might miss the most important moment of your life.

You might wake up to find God standing over you with suitcases in both hands, saying, “Where were you when I arrived? The door was standing wide open, no lights on anywhere. I thought I told you to watch out for me.”

“Therefore, keep awake,” Jesus says, “because you don’t know when the master of the house will come - in the evening, or at midnight, or at dawn. Or he may come suddenly and find you asleep. So Jesus says to everyone: Keep awake”

Now in the Greek text, the word used here is the very same word Jesus uses in the Garden of Gethsemane when he begs Peter, James, and John to stay awake and pray with him. “Stay awake,” he says, “Stay conscious! As hard as it is, as long as it takes, please don’t go to sleep on me.”

Probably most of us like to sleep, so no doubt this is a hard saying. But you know, there is an interesting quote from the famous English writer G. K. Chesterton that sleep is one of the surest signs of trust in God.

He says, “When I am trying to run the world all by myself, I have a hard time sleeping. I wake up at two in the morning and start thinking about all the awful things that are going to happen because I failed to handle them properly.

My dogs are going to die because I forgot to give them their heartworm pills. My house is going to burn down because I still have not installed smoke alarms. The government is going to get all my money when I die because I keep putting off an appointment with the estate planner.”

Most of us can identify with that, I’m sure. Nearly everyone has a “worry list,” and the longer the list, the longer we stay awake. But when we are able to turn things over to God and trust God – not to solve all our problems by magic but to equip us with the strength and determination to work on them - then we can sleep.

So, we think of sleep as a good thing, not a bad thing. But we also know how sleepiness can work on people who are up against problems they do not want to face.

Let me tell you about what a young college student once shared. She said that when she was a first-year college student, she was assigned a sophomore roommate who slept all the time. When she left for class in the morning, her room-mate was asleep. When she came back to the dorm for lunch, the room-mate was asleep. She stirred for a short while in the afternoon, but by dark she was back in bed with a pillow over her head.

The girls sharing this said it was several weeks before she learned the secret that had driven her room-mate to unconsciousness. She was pregnant. Abortion was illegal. She had no choice but to drop out of school and have the baby, which apparently she did. After she packed up her pajamas at the end of the fall quarter, no one at school saw or heard from her again.

So there is that kind of sleep, too – not a sign of trust but of terrible fear, so terrible that the mind just shuts down.

If you have ever had anesthesia before surgery, then you know how it goes. First, there is a kind of static between the ears, then the eyelids start to stick, then sleep comes and the world goes away. There is no pain. There are no dreams. There is only darkness and oblivion. Fear can put us into a conscious state of unconsciousness.

There is another kind of sleepiness most of us know about, which is a result of boredom. You have a three-hour flight, or a four-hour drive, or a five-hour wait until someone comes to fix the washing machine. With so much time on your hands, time can lose its meaning. It is hard to say whether it passes slowly or quickly. It does both. It does neither.

Even if you find other things to do while you wait, you know you are still waiting – for something you cannot make happen, for something you cannot rush – and the sheer monotony of all that helplessness can put you right to sleep.

I don't know for sure which kind of sleepiness Jesus is warning us against, but he clearly wants us to wake up. Stay awake! Stay conscious! As hard as it is, as long as it takes, please don't go to sleep on me.

None of us ever knows when the end will come – for us, for those we love, for the church, for the world – and the weight of all that unknowing can put us right to sleep, because being asleep is a lot easier than being afraid, or being bored, or being helpless. Being asleep is easier than being alive, period, only Jesus will not stand for it.

“Wake up!” he says, when his own end is near. Wake up to whatever life is bringing you – as a person, as a people – wake up to pain, if that is what is there for you to wake up to, because you cannot be healed until you admit you are hurt;

Wake up to the love you will not let yourself have because you are so afraid you will lose it; wake up to the future you are so furious about because it is not the one you ordered; wake up to the fact that you are not the master here, just the servant in charge.

And while you are at it, wake up to the incredible honor of being given such a job – not down in the basement, but at the front door where you will be the first to see the master when he comes.

It has been a long time since he came the first time, and we have been waiting a long time for him to come again. But how long is not really the issue for us; how awake we are is. Our job is to stay conscious – to stay alive to everything that life is bringing us – so we do not miss God when God comes.

Advent disrupts the settled Christmas-coming territory of decorating trees and strolling through malls with shopping list in hand with the unsettling news of second comings and signs in heavens and earth. And the purpose of the disruption is to awaken us to faithful consciousness of God's coming realm.

This parable in today's gospel reading was given to the disciples before Jesus left the earth as a warning of His return and description of the work of His church while they await His coming.

When Jesus was speaking to his disciples, maybe he was warning the disciples His coming was not so far in the future, but it would be in the next days. His coming as the Messiah would be revealed for all to see, and they flat out missed it.

What about us?? Is our vision better than those of the disciples??? How do we see and read scripture concerning His return? The message of His return is found throughout the New Testament as it says : In Acts 1:11, "This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven shall return in like manner."

In John 14: 3, Jesus says: "I go to prepare a place for you, and when I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and take you to myself that where I am you may be also."

He is coming again in that we can be sure, but when that is remains a mystery, for in Matthew 24:44 He says: "Always be ready because I am coming at an hour you do not expect." or in Matthew 24:36 He says: "Of that hour and that day no one knows, only the Father in heaven."

This point of being ready can be seen in the following:

There is a story about a tourist who was traveling along the shores of Lake Como in northern Italy. When he reached the castle, a friendly old gardener opened the gate and showed him the ground which the old man kept in perfect order.

The tourist asked when the owner of the castle had last been there.

"12 years ago", the old man answered.

"Does he ever write to you? "

"No."

"From whom do you get your instructions? "

"From his agent in Milan. "

"Does he come?"

"Never!! "Who, then, comes here?"

"I am almost always alone! Only once in awhile a tourist comes."

"But you must keep this garden in such fine condition just as though you expected your master to come tomorrow."

The old gardener promptly replied, "Today, sir, today!!!"

Jesus is coming again. And what about our vision?? Are we waiting for His coming only at the end of time?

Or will it be at the end of our time??

Or, do we sense that He comes now, today, everyday, in many surprising ways??

Has he come to you?

"Wake up," he says. "Stay awake." Don't miss him.