

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
November 27, 2011
Rev. Diana Hartman
Worship Theme: Riding On Clouds
Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and it's the liturgical season we love to hate. The rest of the world, it seems, is reveling in a month-long celebration—feasting and shopping and going to parties from late November till December 25—while the church is wringing her hands and preaching about the end of time.

“Keep awake!” we're told. Don't miss the signs of Christ's coming. But most of us don't need to be told to keep awake. We are already operating in a state of sleep deprivation. Nobody could accuse us of being asleep at the wheel. Rather we might be accused of scurrying and over scheduling, running but getting nowhere, like a hamster on a wheel. As Advent begins, the fall season has swept us through the “back to school season” of taking children to sports practices, choir rehearsals, and dance lessons. The church has mimicked the rhythm of the world, with programs now in full gear, from youth groups to adult studies and festive events. And suddenly we find ourselves in the rush to Advent.

With all there is to get ready for the holidays, secularly and sacredly, nobody needs to tell us to “keep awake.” As a pastor, it strikes me this may instead be the season to pass out the sleeping pills or the chamomile tea, to a revved up, over caffeinated culture of busy-ness.

While all our hyperactivity may seem to be pointed toward Christmas, it is seldom pointed toward the coming Christ. As Advent marches swiftly forward, the number of shopping days left offers a countdown that stresses us out and keeps us up late. These days we are startled into extra hours of wakefulness in a church season that annoyingly presumes we might be asleep. No wonder we tune it out, like teenagers hearing a parent's repetitive lecture and knowing that mom simply doesn't understand.

But of course, God does understand. In this way the Scripture from long ago reads us, not the other way around. In Advent, we are indeed asleep too much of what matters.

Today's gospel reaches for strange, stirring imagery, signs from heaven, darkened sun and moon, the Son of Man riding on clouds, all to say that the present world in which we live is not fixed or final.

There is a new world coming, we're told. Something is being born among us. Wait. Watch. Hope. You will see a world breaking open into something new and wonderful. God having begun creation shall finish creation. There shall be a new heaven and a new earth.

And if that is not enough to think about, Jesus gives us this foreboding warning to keep awake and be alert for God's coming, for we do not know when God will act. God will act in God's own time not according to our schedules no matter how carefully we planned and entered them into our Blackberry's and iPhones.

I can't help but wander if the Second Advent might not elude me. After all, as we look back at the Old Testament prophets, especially Daniel and we discover that the coming of the Messiah was described in much the same way as what we've read today. And when our Savior was born quietly in a stable in Bethlehem, only a very few folks were aware of what was happening. What if my idea of Jesus returning riding on clouds, wielding a sword as the sky begins to fall turns out to be equally as wrong? Might I too, miss this event if it turns out to be as quiet and unobtrusive?

Oddly out of place and sandwiched between metaphoric and symbolic description of the End of Time in Mark's gospel and Jesus warning in the story of the master returning unexpectedly, there is a brief passage about the fig tree and how it gives a sign about the coming of summer. Unlike the evergreens that adorn our homes this time of year, the fig trees show the changing of the seasons, even in the midst of the desert climate in Israel. After losing their leaves in winter, the trees become dry and brittle. It's difficult to determine

if they are dead or alive. As spring approaches, the sap rises and the branches become tender and buds appear. It is a sign that winter is over and summer is coming.

When it comes to seeing more clearly what God is up to in our lives, perhaps all we need to do is to attend more carefully to the world around us. Perhaps, Jesus points out the fig tree because it had been a long time since folks slowed down long enough to notice what was happening in front of their eyes. Has the miracle of rebirth in the springtime become so common place, that folks no longer take notice? Perhaps they had been so caught up in shopping for bargains in a failing economy, wars and violence, earthquakes and hurricanes they hadn't noticed that God was actually present in the most ordinary events of their lives. Is it possible when Jesus said, "I will be with you always," that he really meant everyday, 24/7?

Our gospel reading from Mark is often referred to as the Little Apocalypse. Did you know that the word "Apocalypse" simply means "revelation?" Revelation, as in a moment when you see something that you've looked at a million times as if for the first time. So often, our expectation keeps us from seeing what is really there in front of us. I sometimes will carry my coffee cup and set it down in a place I don't typically set a cup. I will look all over and right past it, not seeing the cup because I am not expecting to see it in that place. Or I'll reread something I've typed and never recognize the mistakes, because I'm seeing what I expect to see not what is really there

Revelation, on the other hand, is that moment when you see into, beyond and through what you think is going on to what is really happening because *God* has let you and because *you* are paying attention at the time. It's like the puzzles I used to do as a kid in Hi-Life magazine— searching for the many small pictures hidden within a bigger picture. We have to train ourselves to look beyond what we think we are seeing to what is really present.

"Be alert all the time," Jesus says. Not so that you don't get bashed in the head by a star falling from a moonless, sunless sky, but so that you will not miss God when God is right there in front of you.

And yet we are not to mistake this holy season of waiting and hoping as a passive time. We are not passively waiting like a fisherman waits for the spring thaw and fishing season to begin. Passive waiting is indeed a burden. But waiting for Christ is not passive. Advent is a time when the spring thaw pushes the sap up into the tree and buds begin to form. Advent is a time when the servants are busy doing the spring cleaning in anticipation of the Master's return.

Passive waiting is easier. We can live our lives as if the world were a waiting room and we are merely flipping through magazines, filling the time with whatever is at hand. Or we can activate our waiting. We can put ourselves in a place where God is apt to draw near. We can be daily readers of scripture, so that we can recognize and interpret those events where God is present and active in our lives.

For Nora Gallagher active hope and waiting takes place as she helps to serve a meal at the soup kitchen hosted by her church. It is a special meal, a feast they share just before Christmas. And they've got the works. The room is full. Most of the guests are men, but there is one table of women and children. Gallagher sees them, and then it happens.

In the midst of the Christmas rush—shopping, wrapping presents, sending cards—Advent breaks in on me.

I scoop the salad, put it on a plate, and put the plate on a tray. I turn from the salad to face the room. It happens without warning, just as I turn. I see the people in the room in slow motion, as if they are moving through molasses. Their faces are shining. A middle-aged woman walks across the room holding in front of her a plate piled with food, she smiles at the man she is about to serve. Between them, for a second, I see a cord drawn taut, a connection of light. Her face is lit up. She places the food in front of him, sways slightly, as if she we onboard a ship then rights herself and walks away. One of the women with children looks up. Our eyes meet. She points at her daughter, who is eating a huge plate of turkey and stuffing, and we both laugh.

This is her Advent vision. “We prepare by this, she says, “by falling down before each other.” There, for a moment, holiday chaos and poverty’s weariness collide, and the collision causes something to break open—some unexplainable joy, some glimpse of heaven, some bright hope where none was expected to shine. The memory of a holy birth and the hope of promises fulfilled, lived in this unexpected present moment. It is a Spirit sighting as she gazes into the kingdom of God.

How might we position ourselves to behold Spirit sightings in our own lives? This story by Pam Hawkins provides one answer.

As we entered the sanctuary, it was almost time for the Advent Service of Lessons and Carols to begin. After friends made room for us on their crowded pew, we sat down just as the choir moved into place for the processional hymn. When I looked up, I noticed a man sitting alone in the choir loft. He was middle-aged, dressed in a choir robe, and was leaning forward in an odd posture. At first, I thought he had arrived too late to join the rest of the choir at the back of the church. He must have decided just to hurry to his seat.

Yet as I watched him more closely, there was nothing rushed about him, but rather the contrary—he seemed calm and unhurried. This man sat very still, almost strangely so—eyes straight ahead, jaw thrust up, neck taut—holding still as though he anticipated something was about to happen.

Then suddenly he stood up, as if he had heard some cue inaudible to the rest of us. And he broke into a smile that lit up his whole person, a smile like we see on someone who has received wonderful news; yet he stood there alone, no one near him, leaning over the choir screen and into the open space beyond him.

That was when I realized the man was blind. He had not arrived late but had been waiting right where he needed to be, probably where he waited often. He had been listening for the sound of readiness, a sound he had attuned his ears to hear. He was anticipating with his whole being that first sound of movement and music from a distance. He was leaning into the Advent space of God's gathered people, poised and ready, and when he heard what he had been waiting for, he was moved to joy. This Advent, may we be so poised. May we learn to wait well, expectations high, stretching toward God's people. May we grow in anticipation of what the coming of Christ can mean for the waiting world. May we seek and find our place in the unfolding story of Christ.¹

Advent hope calls us to recognize God’s reality, a reality that promises that God is about to do a new thing with us, in us and through us. Our holy waiting and hoping is a time to be as fully alive as we can be. If we’re watching, we might even have Spirit sightings of our own as we gaze upon Christ riding on clouds, ushering in the coming reign of God and as we joyfully proclaim, “God did awesome deeds we did not expect.” Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

¹ *Simply Wait: Cultivating Stillness in the Season of Advent* by Pamela C. Hawkins.