

Keep Awake: *Mark 13:24-37*

Norwalk Christian Church, written for November 30, 2014, Advent 1, Year B...Preached December 7, 14, Advent 2 (Oliver born)

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas! Christmas, Christmas time is here. Time for love and time for cheer. It's the most wonderful time of the year. It's the hap-happiest season of all. We've decked the halls with boughs of holly! 'Tis the season to be jolly. Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!

So, if everything is so "fa, la, la, la, la", why read a text like this that's so depressing!

Suffering, the sun and moon will be darkened, stars falling from the sky...Beware! Keep Awake!! Now, that'll get you in the Christmas mood!

Of course, it's not Christmas, not yet. It's Advent, the season of the Christian year where we ease into Christmas. The word Advent means "coming" and during Advent, we focus on the coming of Christ into the world. The prayer of Advent is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". Rescue us! Save us!

Texts like Mark 13 may not get us in a Christmas mood, but it will certainly get us in an Advent mood. Not that we need any help, though. A quick browsing of the headlines can put to sleep any Christmas hope we may have.

From injustice in Ferguson and New York City, which has exposed a racial rift in our country that we have long ignored, but can no longer deny. Senseless violence in Pleasant Hill. Stories of rape and assault. ISIS. Beheadings. Climate change. Sexism. Sickness. Cancer. Hunger. Suffering and death.

Keep awake! Jesus says. But how could we sleep? There is so much going on in our world and in our lives. So much to fear. So much that is not right. We are awake! We are alert! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and rescue us!

Though these words of Mark may not seem appropriate in our joyous season, they are certainly appropriate for our times. Our text is known to biblical scholars, and seminary grads who like to show off, as "Mark's Little Apocalypse." Sounds fun, and a little cute, when you put it that way. Awww, it's a little apocalypse.

Contrast it with a big apocalypse, like the book of Revelation. Apocalypses big and small all have several things in common: they love this sort of confusing, dark language. Stars usually fall. Suns are darkening. Things get really bad. And they always talk about the end of the world.

And our reaction to such texts are usually the same: Fear! The end is near! The Son of Man may return at any moment! Get your house in order! Beware!!

But is that the reaction Jesus is after? Fear? Keep awake, yes, but why?

As Jesus often does when he delivers hard to understand teaching, he gives us a parable to further confuse things. Since this text is more dark than others, we get two parables: a one about a fig tree and one about a master leaving and returning.

In the fig tree parable, we are told to learn a lesson from the fig tree. It may have been a long winter, but when you see the buds forming on the fig tree, you know summer will be there soon.

In the second parable, we are told that the Son of Man's return is like a master, who goes on a journey and puts his employees in charge of things. The employees keep things ready, and are always on the watch, eager for their master to return.

Now, I don't know a lot about winter...yet...but I'm sure that once we near the end of our first Iowan winter, we will be looking for signs of a new season anywhere we can find it, eager for warmer days.

I do know a thing or two about being put in charge of things, while the boss is away. It's fun, at first, being in charge. But soon, your limits are tested. You don't know what to do in every situation. You worry about things falling apart. And when the boss finally returns, you are more than eager, and want to throw a party!

Both of these parables are about watching. Both are about staying awake, watching for may come at any day. And both of these parables are about the joy you have when what you are waiting for finally arrives.

Joy? Now that's a strange emotion for a text we thought was about end of the world fear and suffering?

But wait? Didn't our text, this whole "little apocalypse", begin with the phrase: "But in those days, after the suffering...."

AFTER the suffering. Here we thought this text was all about the coming fear and suffering. It's not. This text is about birth. It's painful, yes. It can happen at any moment. But after the pain, after the suffering, there is new life.

Let me tell you a parable of my own. Keep Awake! For you never know when that baby will be born. Morning, night or noon? It may be two weeks early...or a week late. Or, right on time. So, keep awake! Be prepared. Have the driveway shoveled! Have your hospital bag packed! Have guest preachers, just in case it comes early--which he won't!

Before that baby is born, there will be contractions and pain...exhaustion...water will break. When you see these things taking place, you know that the is near, at he is at the very gates.

Then, after the suffering, there will be new life and great joy. A son, coming...with great power and glory, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in his mother's arms.

Now that is a parable I can understand. Keep awake, Jesus says, for you never know when new life may be born.

We are use to preparing for the worse. But Mark's "little apocalypse" isn't about preparing for the worse. It's about preparing for the best.

There is so much going on in our world. So much pain. So much suffering. Ferguson. ISIS. Violence and poverty. Climate change. Cancer. So much pain.

But keep awake! Keep waiting. For there, in the midst of the pain, in the midst of injustice, peace is coming...new life is being born.

A couple weeks ago, when our friend Sara was here and we were patiently waiting for Oliver's arrival, we decided it was time to watch again one of our favorite Christmas movies, *Love Actually*. Now, if you haven't seen it, let me say that the rating suggests that it's not a family Christmas movie, which is why we watched *after* the children were "nestled all snug in their beds."

The movie tells the story of several people's encounters with love. Some almost lose love, miss love, some discover love in the most unlikely places, some find love just when they thought it would never happen. The message through all these stories is a simple one: Love, actually, is all around.

It's hard to see it, I know. When the pain of aging sets in...when holidays come and loved ones are no longer with us...when the diagnosis is not good...when the news depresses...when the streets break out in long-festering, justifiable rage...it's enough to make us want to give up, and go to sleep.

But keep awake!

Because there, in the midst of the pain, there are people who refuse to give into violence, and instead build bridges of peace. There are people giving of their lives to make the world better. People fighting cancer with dignity and hope. People overcoming addiction. Marriages healing. Families, stressed and stretched, but still together, still supporting, and always loving. People sharing meals and laughs together, giving to those without, serving those in need.

Don't miss it! Stay awake. Keep watch. For it's coming. Christ is coming. One day, yes. Through the clouds. With great power and glory. After the suffering...after the pain...Christ is coming.

But, maybe, maybe, Christ is already here. Maybe he never left. Maybe *we* just fell asleep.

May this Advent season wake us up, so that we can see that hope, peace, joy and love are, actually, all around us. And that Christ is here--right now--birthing new life into our world.

and now let us sing O Come, O Come Emmanuel...I know we sang it last week, but I wasn't here, and it's my favorite hymn. It is an advent hymn, as we sing in preparation to join Christ at the Communion table.