

“Stay Awake”
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;
Mark 13:24-37

November 29, 2020, 1st Sunday of Advent
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As we have noted several times already in worship this morning, and as we note so often, we come remembering the struggles and the uncertainties of our times. We think about the ways we wish things were different. The sense of what is normal is not what it has been. There are so many things we would like to change about the way the world works right now. 2020 has been one of those years where it has seemed like we have had one struggle after another, and has shown us how far we have yet to go. In some ways it has been one of those times when it feels like the world is falling apart.

Today, we begin a new church year with this First Sunday of Advent. If we follow that idea of the church year, we generally view December as the end of 2020 and we still have a few weeks to go to the new year. However, today is the beginning of the church year, and the church year doesn't start with everything new. It starts with an anticipation. It starts with that moment where things feel like they are falling apart. We read this passage from Mark in which we hear Jesus talk about a time when things are falling apart – the stars falling from the sky, the sun darkened – this idea that everything is falling apart. Certainly, we think about this in the ultimate sense as the end of time, and certainly in our Christian tradition we have seen that and anticipate that as well. Yet in this passage he is talking to a group of people and suggesting they will see this before their generation passes. So, he is also using some of his descriptive skills, his metaphor and simile, to suggest that they will go through this experience of the world falling apart.

I think it suggests to me that we go through these times where we feel the world falling apart. He suggests that it is exactly in that moment that something new can begin. He often uses the imagery of putting a seed in the ground. Even though it seems the seed dies, there is something new starting in what seems to be bare earth, amidst the darkness. So somehow the church, over time, has decided that's where we start. We start with this sense of the world falling apart, and yet in the midst of that is the exact time to remember God's promises, to remember that God is not gone. Jesus, in some ways, describes it as that time when the limbs of the tree begin to get supple and we begin to see the buds. There is something afoot even in the midst of that uncertainty, even in the midst of that time when the world is falling apart. Something is growing under the surface. Something is about to happen.

But he does go on to suggest we should be careful because we don't know the exact time and the hour. He's not suggesting what we do will determine that time or hour, or our judgment on someone else will determine that time or hour. Instead, he says, "Stay awake. Watch." In a way he is saying, "Remember the promise. Stay consistent with the guidance I have given you. Live according to the will of God and watch for how God might enter in, how God might be present."

When something starts for us, it's easy to be excited about the thing that is about to happen. I always remember the beginning of a car trip with our children. I think everybody has heard that question, "Are we there yet?" That anticipation at the beginning is easy to have and yet, we have a long way to go. In fact, we usually would tell our children, "Go to sleep. It will be easier that way." Jesus seems to be saying the opposite here. He's saying, "Stay awake. There's work to do in the interim." But it does lead to an anticipation, that sense that we can wait and watch and look and wonder what God might be up to.

In fact, as we come into this season we do a lot of things that remind us to think about and appreciate that we are beginning something new, that we are looking forward. One of things we do is decorate trees. Particularly on this tree in our sanctuary, we put on the Chrismons which are Christmas decorations with Christian symbolism. They remind us of what is coming. They help us anticipate that we will have a promise fulfilled and the life of faith ahead of us. They remind us that God comes into our world in a real and important way that enables us to know the very love of God and the grace that God would show.

The church year assumes that we start with that anticipation in the midst of what might seem like darkness. In the midst of a time when things feel like they have fallen apart, a new beginning is starting. So, the church year invites us to walk into that new beginning through Advent. It is a promise that happens yearly. It is both a promise that happens in those special times in our lives when we walk again into a recognition of Christ's presence with us, and a promise of an ultimate time when we will know the fullness of God's promise and the return of Christ, or our return to Christ.

So, in the midst of a difficult time we can anticipate light breaking into the darkness. We can stay awake to what God might be doing, knowing that the time will come when Christ returns and enters again into our lives. We are invited to stay awake and to watch for God to move, for Jesus to come, for the Spirit to blow through our lives. Amen.