

**Mark 13:24-37**

*'But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,*

*and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,*

*and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

*Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

*'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

*'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'*

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Beginning in at least October, the big box stores anticipate this time of year. It's hard to avoid - even if you don't happen to go in any of them, friends and family post pictures of the premature Christmas decorations with laments of "too soon" and "whatever happened to Halloween".

A friend of mine posted a picture of all of the lawn decorations lined up on a ridiculously high shelf and there in the middle was an 8' tall, inflatable dragon - with a lit up belly, wings spanning over 11 feet that move, and of course a Santa hat and a candy cane in its mouth (just like when Jesus was born)... My friend wrote: "A Christmas dragon? #HomeDepotfail."

And all I could think was, "I WANT THAT SO BAD!!!"

It's not that I am dismissing Advent. It's more like with everything that's going on in the world, I want to full out lean into the hope and the peace and the joy and the love... and the lights and the cheer and yes, even the Christmas dragon.

Theologically, and liturgically, the Advent church season is about waiting. But it's not a 'back on our heels' waiting - it's a 'balls of our feet' waiting.

One of the many reasons I love to go to a baseball game is because you get a wider view of the field than you do when you watch it on television. You can see the infielders and outfielders, who may not even look like they are paying that much attention, but the moment the pitcher goes into the wind-up they all move forward and up on their toes in the ready position as they anticipate that the ball may come to them.

Advent is a reminder that we need to get into the 'ready' position. There's no time for playing with the dandelions in right field, there's no snooze button or cat naps – it's stand up on your toes, get ready – anticipate!

It doesn't matter the state of chaos in the world. "Hope is about to be rekindled, peace is on the horizon, joy is shining on the edges of our vision, and love is just an arm's length away."<sup>i</sup>

*Keep awake!* The Gospel of Mark says: *You do not know when the master of the house will come... you do not know when the time will come...*

The Gospel of Matthew says it like this: *Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour* (25:13). That Gospel also gives us a blueprint for what we should be doing to get ready:

*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."*

I preached that passage last Sunday, but I haven't been able to shake it. It's true we each have a personal responsibility to bring in the kingdom of God, but that passage begins with a judgment of nations: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him...*

I fear as a nation we've fallen asleep, sedated by power and wealth that for most of us is always a tease, never an actuality, and for all of us is fleeting. Watch closely this week, and call our legislators as the Senate and House of Representatives negotiate their differences on this current tax reform bill.

*Keep awake! You do not know when the master of the house will come...*

What happens if the Lord comes to judge the nations this week?

What happens if our eternal life is judged on how we vote to treat the hungry and the thirsty, the naked and the sick, the stranger and the prisoner?

I fear we've nodded off.

The first Christmas I came home from college on the train from Florida to New Jersey. This is a two day ride that isn't too bad if you convince yourself that the journey is half the fun. But those of you who have used train travel for long distances know how frustrating the long stops on the side of the tracks, while freight trains that have the right of way go by, can be. I just wanted to get home, and I had the added disadvantage of for some reason being able to sleep while the train was moving, but not when it was stopped. By the time we got into southern New Jersey I was exhausted and we had a couple of hours to go yet.

My Mom was at the train station in Red Bank waiting for me. It was my freshman year so she had actually parked and got out of the car and was on the platform. The train pulled in and people unloaded... and then the train blew its whistle and began to move again.

I, of course, was still on the train... but not for the reason you probably think.

The train was too big for the station so they let off the first batch of passengers, then pulled the train forward and let off the next group of passengers. I was in the second group, but because there were no cell phones back in those days of yore – I had no way to tell my Mom not to worry – the train would stop again.

But here's the thing about my Mom – you can't throw her. I watched the whole thing through the window of the train. First, she looked eager to greet me, then as the train bumped forward her eyes flared just a bit in surprise, and then she started walking towards the car – only a few steps – before the train stopped again.

We laughed about it when we hugged on the platform. She said she was surprised when I didn't get off the train, and was heading to the car so she could get to a phone to call the station where we just were, and to call my Uncle Bob to have him go to the next stop.

My Mom was surprised... but ready.

The retelling of the Christmas story throughout time, in my opinion, has done a disservice to another woman who was surprised, but ready – Mary... you know, Jesus' Mom. I blame the hymns and carols more than Scripture itself.

“Mary was that mother mild” (*Once in Royal David's City*)

“Gentle Mary laid her child lowly in a manger” (*Gentle Mary Laid Her Child*)

“Round yon virgin mother and child” (*Silent Night, Holy Night*)

And of course, *Mary Did you Know?*

In seven questions this song with the haunting melody manages to insinuate that Mary had absolutely no idea what she was getting herself into. It's the worst kind of mansplaining in question form, and anywhere I hear it I say out loud, “Yes, she knew.”

I've asked Mark to help us learn a new hymn about Mary, please open your hymnals to #101.

I think Mary embodies what the prophets encouraged and the Gospels declare: Keep awake! Mary was surprised... but ready.

### **The Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 26 through 38:**

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.*

**This is the Word of the Lord...**

Mark is going to sing the first two verses of the hymn:

***No wind at the window; no knock on the door;  
No light from the lampstand, no foot on the floor;  
No dream born of tiredness, no ghost raised by fear:  
Just an angel and a woman and a voice in her ear.***

***“O Mary, O Mary, don’t hide from my face.  
Be glad that you’re favored and filled with God’s grace.  
The time for redeeming the world has begun,  
And you are requested to mother God’s Son”.***

Did Mary know? Yes, she did. Admittedly, there is no way one can fully understand what it means to be asked to carry God’s child in a hostile environment. But as Christians, we must anticipate being asked to do God’s will in ways that won’t always find favor with those around us.

We can’t afford to let the earthly kingdom values of this world lull us to sleep. We can’t be stunned into silence and inaction by those who use the very name of Jesus as a weapon against the poor, the oppressed, and those who seek justice.

God is asking us to be the hope in this world,  
To be the peace in this world,  
To be the joy in this world,  
To be the love in this world.

It’s okay to be surprised by God’s expectations of us – but as believers in the Gospel, and followers of God’s will – we must anticipate that God will ask...

Will we say yes?

Let us stand together and sing verses 3 and 4:

***“This child must be born that the kingdom might come:  
Salvation for many, destruction for some;  
Both end and beginning, both message and sign;  
Both victor and victim, both yours and divine.”***

***No payment was promised, no promises made;  
No wedding was dated, no blueprint displayed.  
Yet Mary, consenting to what none could guess,  
Replied with conviction, “Tell God I say, Yes.”***

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The Reverend Dr. Rachel Keefe. “Revised Common Lectionary: The Wake Up Edition” RevGalBlogPals.  
<https://revgalblogpals.org/2017/11/28/revised-common-lectionary-the-wake-up-edition/#comment-121849>