

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, March 17, 2024

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This morning we will continue in the Gospel of Mark. We'll be in the 13th chapter. We'll read from verses 32 through 37. Bit of context before we pray our prayer of Illumination. So Jesus has spent most of this 13th chapter foretelling of future events that will come to pass. So he speaks of the destruction of the temple and of persecution that those who follow in the ways of Christ will experience. He speaks of the desolating sacrilege of the fall of Jerusalem. These are things of which Jesus speaks just before he gives this encouragement, we'll call it that, to his disciples and to everyone who is listening. So that's the context for us. Before we read scripture together, let us go to God in prayer.

Gracious and loving Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning. Give us a measure of your peace in these moments. Quiet us that we might hear your word for us, that as we hear we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Mark 13, starting in the 32nd verse.

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 servants 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 the 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.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Bit of confession. I...I'm not really the best person to speak about keeping awake. I'm the...I'm the guy that hits the snooze button like 10 times, like sets my alarm an hour early and then hits the snooze button over and over and over again. None of y'all are like that. I know all of y'all rise immediately as the sun rises. I've actually slept through some pretty significant things in my life. I remember a few years ago I went hunting, as I've talked about, in Virginia, and I was bundled up. It was really cold that morning. I was bundled up in a bunch of camo, and I was feeling toasty. I had some hand warmers and some foot warmers on, and so even though it was like 15 degrees in the stand, I felt nice. I don't really remember much from about 5:00 a.m. when I got in the stand till about 9:00 a.m., but it was a beautiful morning. Got back to the cabin, and the owner of the property—a friend of mine, a mentor of mine—said, “How was the morning?” I said, “It was quiet.” He said, “Did you see anything?” I said, “Not even a squirrel.” He said, “That's interesting, because I checked the game camera this morning. I saw the biggest buck I've ever seen walk right under your deer stand, and I saw you cozied up and asleep.” I was a bit embarrassed, but also not all that surprised. It kind of comes with the territory for me. Keeping awake isn't always the easiest. It's not easy for the disciples either. We'll learn that here in a little bit in this story. That's why Jesus challenges them here after giving them a preview of several things that will come to pass. He admonishes them to keep awake. He gives them a charge

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because he knows what is to come, and he knows when the world becomes difficult and heavy, we have and the disciples had the inkling to close our eyes, to look away, to fall asleep to the things that are going on in the world. He knows that it is easy for the world to wear down our spirits and, therefore, our attention. He knows that soon those who follow in the ways of Christ will experience the destruction of the temple. They will know persecution. They will even see the fall of Jerusalem. But even before that he uses a particular four movement phrase that we need to pay attention to. In verse 35 he says, "Therefore keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at the cockcrow or at dawn." And you might think that he's just picking out four times that are of no real consequence, but as Elizabeth Johnson points out to us in her commentary on this text, the phrasing is incredibly purposeful.

"At evening the disciples will gather for the Passover meal, and Jesus will reveal that one of them will betray him and each of them will say, 'Surely not I, Lord.' At midnight in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus will take aside Peter and James and John and implore them to stay awake and watch and pray with him. Yet three times Jesus will return and find them sleeping. After the third time Judas will arrive with the guards who will arrest Jesus, and the rest of the disciples will desert him. At the cockcrow, Peter will come to the bitter realization that he has denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus predicted; and at dawn the chief priests and scribes will bring Jesus before Pilate to be tried. Jesus will stand there in that space utterly alone. Not one of his disciples will wait and watch for him."

Jesus knows that the disciples need to be challenged to stay awake because of what they are about to endure. The world around them will try to lull them to sleep, and so he challenges them.

"Beware, stay awake." And if it is a challenge for the disciples to stay awake, then it most certainly is a challenge for us as well. We know also the difficulties of the world. We see difficulty all around us. We see oppression. We see a distribution of wealth that hurts many. We see some held to account when others are not. We see inequity in the way in which our justice system works. It's enough to wear us down. And not just those large cultural or systemic ills, we also have our daily living. David Foster Wallace, in his work *This is Water*, points out that "It is unimaginably hard to do this, (to do what?) to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out." He says it's so difficult because of the monotony that can take over in our lives. It can wear us down. It can make us want to simply shut our eyes and go to sleep to it all.

And so, then, the challenge of the disciples is also our challenge. And then the question in this Lenten season is what are the things that are tiring you out, making you weary, making you try to find a space in the corner where you can lay your head and fall asleep, instead of having to pay attention and stay awake to the world. Here's the thing. When we fall asleep to the difficulties of the world, we don't just fall asleep to those, we fall asleep also to the goodness and the possibility and the work of God. So when Jesus admonishes the disciples to stay awake, he is telling them to stay keenly aware of the difficulties and the injustice that they will experience and see in the world and to stay awake to the goodness of God. See, Jesus, even in giving this advice to the disciples, he is displaying his own faith. Scripture tells us that even he does not know

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when the master will return, not the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father. So even in this instance Jesus is walking by faith into a world that he knows is dark and difficult and will ultimately take his life. Jesus is keenly aware of those difficulties, but he's also keenly aware of who God is. And so while the disciples fall asleep in the garden, he can stay awake even in the midst of impending suffering. He can stay awake to the possibilities of the Divine, the power of God, the faithfulness of God, the ultimate triumph of God. Jesus knows that our faith teaches us something, and that is Hope.

Jesus knows that the anguish will ultimately “give way to new life and to new creation,” as Johnson continues. “Jesus says that the troubles before the end are only be the beginning of the birthing pangs.” That happens at the beginning of the 13th chapter of Mark, which means that “the present pain will give way to new life, to a new creation. He promises to return and to gather his chosen ones from the ends of the Earth.” And so the disciples are to “watch and wait, not because (their) salvation depends upon it—that will be secured in God's hand— but because Jesus has given them a mission, because he has called (them) to participate here and now in the new creation that God is ushering in.” And the hope for the disciples, then, is also our hope. The challenge for the disciples is also our challenge. We must keep awake not only to the difficulties of the world but also to who God is in it. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be asleep to the ways in which my siblings are hurt and devalued in this world, to the ways in which Injustice permeates so much of the world in which we live; and I certainly don't want to be asleep to the possibilities of the divine power at work here and now, because if I fall asleep to one, I fall asleep to the other. I want to be awakened by and awakened to God's goodness. When voices rise only to foretell destruction, to only tell the first part of the story, I want to be someone who speaks about and lives in such a way to proclaim that death and destruction are not the ending, that God's final word will always be life and possibility.

I don't always read commentaries on the text, but sometimes I do. My favorite commentary is *Feasting on the Word*, put together several years ago by a couple of wonderful pastors. This was a big thick book. Last night I found myself by lamplight, just reading through what some really smart people, smarter than I, had to say about this text. I was looking for a story and I found one. I typed it up. Then I had to give the right, uh, I had to credit the right person, so I looked at the very end, and the author of this particular commentary on Mark, chapter 13, was Reverend Steve Montgomery. He says this. “The story is told of a meeting of state legislators in colonial New England that rapidly descended into darkness because of a solar eclipse that no one predicted. In the darkness “some panicked and sought to adjourn the meeting. Then one of them stood up and said, ‘Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty, so I move, sir, that candles be brought in and we continue the work.’” The story illustrates something of what Jesus was trying to communicate to the disciples then and to us now. The world needs people who are both awake to the realities of the world and willing to gather candles to carry light, particularly the Light of Christ, into the most darkened spaces. The world needs people who are keenly aware of who God is and therefore awake to the goodness and the possibility and the power and the faithfulness and ultimately the triumph of God. So perhaps in this season of Lent, perhaps this is

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an opportunity for you to reflect on what it is you have fallen asleep to, perhaps in your journey of faith or your relationships or your work or even your life here at Idlewild. What have you fallen asleep to? What is God in Christ calling you to be awakened to once again. Perhaps, in this season of Lent, this story serves for us as a call to consciousness...to both the reality of the world and the ultimate power of God in it. For we do not know when the Master will come, but he will, and it will be good.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.