

"Awake!"

30 November 2008 – 1 Advent B
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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."

Prayer.

Signs.

Traffic control devices
that promote safety
and the efficient flow of traffic.
Failure to follow the signs
results in a penalty, at best,
(a ticket, fine, and heightened insurance rates)
or a catastrophe, at worse,
a motor vehicle accident, wrecked car, broken body, or death.

"Pay attention to the signs,"
my old driver ed instructor used to say.
Pay attention to the signs.

Signs.
Superstition takes advantage of
our insatiable desire to connect cause and effect,
to impose meaning over the meaningless,
even in spite of the available evidence.
It is as if our thoughts could
independently manipulate an external event.
"I dreamed about the number 17 last night,
my favorite football team is the Bills,
Can't you see it? - it is a sign!
so I bet my paycheck on the Bills winning by 17."
If the sign springs forth from a feeling or emotion
it probably isn't a sign,
it's an addiction.

Signs.
Can be as simple as facts on a spread sheet.
Expenses that increase by 3% each year
While income remains stagnant
Is a sign to do one of three things:
take out a loan,
reduce spending,
or increase income.
This is a trend facing most churches
these days.
What will we do?

Signs.
Vital signs clue us that
these are the ones
to pay closest attention to.
Vital means they point
to the most important aspects of life.
Failure to pay attention will lead to death.
Heart rate: too fast or too slow,
either way, your heart will seize up
and stop pumping

life sustaining
oxygenated blood throughout your circulatory system.
Respiration rate: too fast or too slow,
either way, the exchange of CO₂ and O₂
looses efficiency and your vital organs become starved.
Blood pressure: too little and your blood sludges and plugs.
Too high and you wreck your pipes, your blood vessels.
Either way,
lights out.
Pull the plug.
Call the undertaker.

Signs.
About a month ago
I saw the first signs of Christmas.
They were found in Wegmans and Lowes.
They were being hung on telephone poles by municipal workers,
They were heard on the radio,
and were found in a pile of new music at choir practice.
The first signs even began by falling as snowflakes.
Over the past 72 hours
the secular retail world has been screaming in our face!
The recession is here!
Spend or die!
Spend money you don't have,
to achieve even greater savings!

Hopefully we Christians know differently.
Disciples of Jesus look elsewhere for a sign.

Signs.
The faithful of Isaiah
have worked their way through many signs:
The disbelief of impending doom.
The despair of utter defeat and exile.
The hope of restoration.
And today, the realization that,
now restored and returned to Israel,
they needed God to mold and shape them,
less they fail and return to former, sinful ways.
Show us a sign, O Lord,

that your anger is ended,
your memory of our iniquity is faded,
and that you will shape us into the work of your hands.
Please! Remold us.
Remake us.
Make us new!

Perhaps, if we paid a little less attention to the signs of the world
and more to the signs of our Potter, our heavenly Father
we would be more prepared,
better prepared,
for the coming of Christ
to our world today.

Signs.
Our little apocalypse of today's gospel
is the hinge
between Jesus entering Jerusalem
cursing the fig tree,
teaching his disciples about the vineyard and rejection of the cornerstone,
being tested by every possible religious authority,
and
the unfolding apocalyptic events of the Son of Man,
the passion of Jesus Christ.
This pivot point is an intimate time
when Jesus teaches his disciples:
this temple will be destroyed, he says,
sweeping his hand across the horizon,
allowing it to fall upon himself.
This temple will be destroyed.

Signs.
What are the signs
that all these things
are about to be accomplished?¹ They ask him.
Many will proclaim false signs
and make false claims;
hoaxes meant to mislead.
Many will suffer much,
just as if nails were being pounded through their hands and feet,

¹ Mark 13:4b

and as if a spear is ripped into their side.
But blessed is the one who suffers and waits faithfully,
who isn't taken in by the false-prophets and false-promises.
Blessed is the one who suffers
and endures to the end,
for just as I will rise three days later,
so, too, will that one be saved.²

The cosmos will erupt in signs!
Sun, moon, stars, and all the powers of heaven will shake.
Just as an earthquake and darkened skies spread from Golgotha,
so too does He emerge from the tomb in blinding light.
Those who endure and wait with vigilance
will see visions and will know that the time is ripe;
they will know that Jesus is near,
that Jesus is stepping forth from the tomb
resurrected as a symbol of eternal life
for all who believe.
The manger in the creche will be filled with a baby
as a sign and symbol that he is coming Christmas day.
The Holy Ghost of Pentecost,
and the seal of the Spirit at our baptism,
is a sign and symbol that he is here:
that his spirit has returned
and dwells with you
and is in you.

This is our Lord's promise:
Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.³
Eternity is a long time.
So promises and preparations better be taken
with the utmost of urgency.
Eternity is a long time,
but God's promise remains unchanged:
Christ has come,
Christ is come,
and Christ will come again.

Department store circulars

² Mark 13:13

³ Mark 13:31

may be a sign of changing times,
but they point only to the temporal,
the self-gratifying accumulation of things,
that leaves one hollow,
and like a bad addiction
creates hunger for more.

Instead,
this Christmas,
watch and wait for the signs
that God is giving to us.
Pay attention to these signs.
We may not know when,
but we are assured that he is returning.
Remain alert!
Keep awake!
Less he catch us sleeping.
Amen.