

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – November 29, 2020 – Watchful
1 Corinthians 1:3-9 and Mark 13:24-37

Back in March, when most of us first learned of the severity of the current pandemic, concern naturally mounted. Nationwide, as the virus spread and sick patients began entering hospitals in ever larger numbers, we worried if our healthcare system could adequately care for them. Next came news of furloughs and layoffs. And with the economy shaken and strained, we wondered how the foundations of our financial system would fare amid waves of subsequent shocks.

On a personal level, we have worried about contracting the virus. About keeping our families safe. And about our own, financial resilience. And as months of disruption have stretched on and on, we have adopted new habits. Some of those habits we adopted willingly. Others emerged as a matter of necessity, in an effort to cope with the rapid changes of this moment. And from the beginning, we have been watching and waiting. Hoping for an effective vaccine, and coveting the return of some semblance of life as we knew it.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. And as we enter this historic season of Christian reflection, I am confident that the challenges we have experienced in this present year have strengthened our resolve to engage in the disciplines of watching

and waiting like few occasions that we have ever witnessed. No longer is Advent a hypothetical season of longing and expectation. For we now know what it means to eagerly yearn, day after day, week after week, month after month. And we now know how it feels to hope in that which we cannot see.

Each year, Advent anticipates the arrival of God-made-flesh. The one foretold in hymns of heaven to earth come down. This is the one who is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And this is the one who comes in glory, to challenge and to strengthen, “to disrupt and to save.”¹

In our second lesson this morning, the disciples are disrupted from the ordinary rhythms of life when Jesus instructs them to stay awake and to keep watch. But it doesn't take long for these directives to go unheeded. In the very next chapter, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to a place called Gethsemane. And there, he becomes “distressed and agitated, saying to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.”

¹ Andrew Foster Connors, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2020), 15.

When Jesus returned, he found the three disciples sleeping. “He said to Peter, ‘Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ And again he went away and prayed.” Then, “once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.’”

We recognize that the disciples were, in many ways, extraordinary people. But they were also fallible and prone to failure, just like you and just like me. They were limited by their doubts and fears, and they were confined to human bodies, incapable of toiling forever. And as night fell, they were overcome with the need for sleep.

Several years ago, I took Liam, my oldest child, to a group activity. Night had fallen, and snow was dusting the sidewalks. I accompanied him inside and, after leaving him in the care of the group, I returned to my car to rest. Regrettably, I had nothing left to give. I set an alarm. I closed my eyes, and drifted off to sleep. Sometimes, our bodies tell us that we have reached our limit.

But life also provides us with unexpected opportunities. And in those days when I was struggling to stay awake, even during the daylight hours, my wife shared some important information with me. She told me that she had observed how, at night, it sounded like I was choking in my sleep. And she encouraged me to visit my physician. When I did, I was referred to a specialist who ordered a sleep study.

Neuroscience tells us of the stages of sleep in which we gradually slide from consciousness until, eventually, we enter the deep and restorative world of Rapid Eye Movement. As a result of that sleep study, I was diagnosed with apnea. This means that I was rarely getting the restorative sleep that I needed. Suddenly, my constant exhaustion made sense. The process from my wife's observations to the moment when I had the medical equipment that helped me sleep at night took months. But, as soon as I made that change, the difference was swift and substantial. For the first time in years, I felt strong, and healthy, and vibrant.

As one who has struggled with fitful sleep, I can empathize with the disciples. Previously, if someone had asked me to stay awake just one more hour, I could not have done it, even if I had wanted to. For the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. And that experience taught me something about God.

You see, we often speak about our journey with Christ as if it was merely spiritual. But it is also a matter of performance. I don't mean that our faith is some stage production and that we are acting our way through it – merely playing a part. No. I mean that we are called to physically persevere in the midst of our bodily challenges and limitations in order that we might accomplish the work that God has set aside for us. This is what it means to truly give our all.

“The danger for believers, according to Mark, is not a dramatic rejection of the faith” or even the “refusal to step up in a critical moment. It is the practice of being lulled to sleep, of losing vision for God’s presence and power before that presence and power have come to full fruition.”² And so, we wait, and we watch, and we hope, knowing “the time of the Son of man’s coming is unknown to all save God the Father.” Therefore, our hope is to be “alert and cautious.”³

Our second lesson this morning “speaks to those who expect too much and those who expect too little.” Yet, “it is especially pertinent for those who have forgotten to expect anything at all.”⁴ And “in view of the dangers both of misguided

² Connors, 15.

³ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009), 242.

⁴ Williamson, 243.

enthusiasm and of careless indifference (“lest he come suddenly and find you asleep,” the text urges disciples to *take heed*, to *stay awake*, and to *watch*.”⁵

I want to leave you with this final story. In colonial New England, an eclipse once darkened the skies, bringing a rush of fear to the inhabitants. “State legislators” there “panicked and several moved to adjourn. But one of them 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. I move you, sir, that candles be brought.’”⁶ Today, we gather amid the soft glow of Advent candles, hoping to be found doing that work to which Christ has called us, until he comes again. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Williamson, 240.

⁶ Williamson, 242.