

## Awake and Watching

Rev. David Reynolds

Mark 13: 24-37

It's hard to stay awake for very long when it's dark. Speaking from personal experience, I think it's just not natural. We aren't made that way. Have you noticed how much more tired you feel if you have to awaken when it's still dark outside, even though due to seasonal change it may be the exact same time of the morning that you always get up? We want to sleep when it's dark. Even though sometimes there are things that keep us up, we want to sleep! We have lots of strategies for trying to get a good night's sleep, don't we?

Charlette and I have recently been conducting an experiment with gelato. You're familiar with gelato, right? It's Italian ice cream. Or, rather it's Italian ice milk. It's made with mainly milk with some heavy cream, so what you get is all the depth of flavor and creaminess of really high end ice cream with a lot less calories. I mean, you know, how good is that?! So, after having gelato out one night at Romano's and then sleeping better than we'd slept in weeks, we've been conducting our own investigation.

But, I digress. The point is we want to sleep when it's dark. And I think the same is perhaps true for other kinds of darkness, too. You know, the darkness of pain and suffering and grief? After awhile, at least, the temptation is to shut down, to not want to stay conscious to it. I know that faculty at colleges are told to keep an eye out for first semester freshmen, many of whom to one degree or another are going through a painful adjustment, a painful disorientation. And a key sign that they may not be handling it very well is if they are sleeping a lot. And there are other ways we "shut down" to the darkness we are experiencing than just physically sleeping, aren't there? We want to sleep when we're living in darkness.

The scriptures for today speak of that urge in us. The prophet Isaiah cries out in anguish for God to finally "tear open the heavens and come down" and alleviate the suffering of the people who are living lives not in sync with God, living lives, in his mind from which God seems absent. And even as he's crying out for God to come and make things right, he *blames* God for things not *being* right! "Because you hid yourself we transgressed," he says to God. Somehow the writer of third Isaiah has come to believe that God is not present in suffering, that God needs to "tear open the heavens and come down" to be present.

And so, his blaming of God's absence for the transgressions of the people represents a refusal to stay awake to God's presence. It is a deadening of his experience of God in times of pain and suffering. And in today's Gospel, Jesus speaks to the same concern. Jesus foresaw terrible times of suffering that indeed would shortly come true for Mark's community and some of which they were already living through. He's speaking here of what he saw would happen to the Temple in Jerusalem, the very center of Jewish faith and life. He foresees its complete destruction, because he has given up hope that the Jewish leaders and rank and file of the people would turn from their scapegoating and divisive politics and the calls for violence that went along with all of that. And just a few years after Mark wrote his gospel that's exactly what happened, but already Mark's community is suffering through family divisions and betrayals, and persecutions at the hands of Jewish leaders.

But listen, Jesus' point to them is don't give up hope then. Don't shut down and think God must have abandoned you. He knew that would be their urge. Well, in recent weeks we've probably begun to get tired of hearing about how bad things are, and how much worse they'll probably get. But, we know it's true. And besides that winter has come early. So, maybe some will be tempted to feel like God is absent during this coming season of Advent and Christmas. Some may not hang out quite as many Christmas lights, or send cards out this year, or buy expensive

gifts. The merchants are certainly afraid of that, aren't they? For some it will just feel like the bleak mid-winter, with no Christmas in sight.

Having identified Christmas, and so in a sense God, with consumerism and prosperity, economic scarcity and the loss of a certain jolly materialistic Christmas spirit *may* appear as a sign of God's judgment, or at least God's absence. Many of us will forge ahead anyway, but perhaps all of us need a reminder that it doesn't take things to be "just right" or like they've always been in this season, for God to be powerfully present. I think maybe the fact that so much of even the Christian community has been tempted to read today's lesson as being about some future "end of the world" is itself this spiritual urge to "fall asleep" to deaden ourselves to the possibility of God's presence, when our life isn't what we want.

You know, Jesus says very clearly here that he is *not* talking about some distant future. He says, "this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened." Certainly Jesus knew what a generation was. And he even follows that up with an oath. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." That's just a common oath of the time. It's like saying, "mark my words, this is going to happen!" And yet, we're tempted to read it as a prediction of some future "end of the world," and so make the life of faith about knowing the "facts" about the future and so supposedly having some power over it, instead of knowing how to be awake and alive to life and to God even when things are bad. We still fight the same urge to spiritually deaden ourselves to life in one way or another and "sleep" when it's dark.

Listen again to how Jesus speaks about those dark times. He says it's not that God is absent from them, that God is unmoved and unmoving. Just the opposite! He says that all of that stuff causes the very "powers in the heavens" to be shaken! God too, is shaken by the suffering of God's beloved creation. It's then, says Jesus, quoting the apocalyptic language of the book of Daniel, that "they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory." And who is the "they" referred to? It's God! It's the powers in the heavens that have been shaken! He's quoting from Daniel 7 where Daniel is presenting a vision he'd had and he says: "I saw one like a son of man coming in the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One (he came to God!) and was presented before him." And *then*, "to him was given dominion and glory and kingship..." So, it's then, says Jesus, that after the Son of Man comes in the clouds to God in heaven that he then sends out the angels to gather God's people.

You see? When things are at their very worst, says Jesus, that's when this loving God who suffers with you, and is shaken by your sufferings, comes to gather you. Right then, even in your cries, you know, when the fig tree is *tender*, know that God is near. Know that the Kingdom of God, hope, resurrection, a new life together is "at the very gates," is arriving even then! You must stay spiritually awake when things are dark. God is calling. God is speaking. God is arriving even then. Would that third Isaiah, who thought that God was angry, or God was apathetic, or absent when things weren't right in his life or in his world, had known what the apostle Paul knew. You remember, Paul wrote that we do not know how to pray, but that the Spirit of God "intercedes with sighs too deep for words." With "*sighs* too deep for words." Isaiah's very cries themselves were God being present.

Friends, I think that's a good clue for what it means for us to keep awake in this winter season, or in any season of darkness. It has to do with true prayer, not necessarily with saying prayers. Said prayers are really just a way to try to get us to a place of true prayer. This spiritual wakefulness has to do with true prayer, that is, with crying out and with watching. The two are connected aren't they? We watch for the One who appears as the love of creation and compassion for its suffering given voice by our cries. Do you know what you're watching for this Christmas? Maybe you already got a little glimpse as you thought about the child of a prisoner that you shopped for, and hoped to bring maybe a little bit of healing to their life.

Livingston Taylor, in a song called "My Perfect Christmas Day," writes of a Christmas morning when he was awakened by his nephew who was worried because he hadn't been able to find any gifts under the tree with his uncle Liv's name on them.

In answer, Taylor writes:  
Santa knows what I want  
For a perfect Christmas Day

Instead of a toy train  
I'd have people all hand in hand  
Voices up in harmony  
Ringing through the land  
And those in charge would listen  
Till everyone had their say  
That would be my perfect Christmas Day

Instead of a shiny bike  
I'd have a family back together again  
Knowing that a little forgiveness  
Can let the love back in  
Bitterness will leave  
Respect and love will stay  
That would be my perfect Christmas Day

Bridge:  
Instead of a baby doll  
A father would find his child  
He'd apologize for the choices he made  
When he was burnt-up young and wild  
And from that moment on  
He's just a phone call away  
Now don't you think that's just about  
The perfect Christmas Day

Instead of a play house  
Everybody would have a home  
Generations together  
Nobody would be alone  
The young teach us how to laugh  
The old teach us how to pray  
That would be my perfect Christmas Day

It's the Kingdom that we cry for and that we watch for, isn't it?

And it's at the very gates, even now.

Amen.