

“Any Time Now”  
Mark 13:32-37  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Do any of you recall that wonderful movie—  
came out 25 years ago now—  
the movie Apollo 13?

The film tells the story of what was supposed to be NASA’s third moon-landing, and how—after their ship was crippled en route—the astronauts Fred Haise, Jack Swigert, and Jim Lovell were barely able to make it back home.

There’s this scene at the end in which the astronauts are about to re-enter earth’s atmosphere. And NASA tells the families and the media that there will a period of 3 minutes when they won’t be able to communicate with the astronauts.

It’s a dangerous period.

- Maybe the heat shield is gone, and the incoming ship will incinerate.
- Maybe the parachutes to slow the ship won’t work, and instead of landing softly in the ocean, they’ll crash land at a deadly speed.

NASA says none of this to the families.

They just say that if there is silence from the astronauts for 4 minutes, then it’s not looking very good.

So of course, in the movie,  
in that scene at the end, everyone is on edge.

The families are glued to their televisions.

NASA is listening, waiting to hear the voices of the astronauts.

Everyone, in other words, is paying attention to ONE THING...will the astronauts return? When will it be? Four minutes goes by...and another five seconds...and another five seconds...

I can't imagine what it would have been like for those families. Any time now...desperately hoping for good news to come your way....any time.

Do you know what it's like for one thing to grab your attention, to consume it, to make it the focus of your life?

In our text from Mark for today, Jesus tells his disciples to pay attention.

“Beware, keep alert,” he says, “for you do not know when the time will come.”

Jesus is speaking here about the advent of God into our lives. That's the one thing the disciples need to look for.

And in every sermon I've ever preached about this text, I've always treated it as an admonition to pay attention—to keep our eyes peeled as we enter the Advent season for how God is at work in our lives and in the world.

It is that, to be sure.

But it occurs to me today that these words are not only about paying attention.

They're also about fatigue...

“Keep awake,” Jesus says—in fact, he says it TWICE, as if he knows his disciples will get tired.

As if he knows hard it is to keep paying attention...to one thing...  
for a long period of time.

How appropriate, at this time, to hear a text about fatigue.

Some close friends of ours are dealing with cancer right now. They’ve been fighting cancer for the better part of the year. The mother in this family wrote recently on CaringBridge:

“We have cancer fatigue. We have covid fatigue. We have election fatigue. We have virtual learning fatigue. We are fatigued by our fatigue.”

Right!

Do you know anything about this?

About being fatigued by your fatigue?

This is why I think today’s text is more important than ever for our lives right now. Because it asks us not only to pay attention for a brief period of time—like the families of the astronauts, when that 4-5 minute window makes all the difference—

but to pay attention OVER THE LONG HAUL:

“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.”

Jesus isn’t just talking about staying up all night.  
He’s talking about the long haul.

He's talking about when we start to get tired by whatever is going on in our lives...will we still keep our eyes peeled  
 for God's grace,  
 for God's hope,  
 for God's love to be at work?

The writer Fred Buechner once wondered what would happen if God gave the world a very dramatic event that REALLY grabbed everyone's attention.

"Suppose," Buechner imagined, "that God were to take the great, dim river of the Milky Way...and were to brighten it up a little,

[to rearrange all the stars in the sky, so that]  
 written out in letters light years tall,  
 [God tells the world]:

I REALLY EXIST."

What would happen?

Well, the initial reaction might be equally dramatic.

Churches could spill over into football stadiums,  
 perhaps wars would suddenly stop,  
 everyone gets their act together...

But then, Buechner says,

there would be the message in the stars night after night,  
 month after month, year after year...

Every night the sky would proclaim, "I REALLY EXIST"—

"I REALLY EXIST."

So what?

What difference would it make—not just immediately,  
but over the long haul?

As Buechner goes on to say,  
what we really need most deeply is not proof  
that there is a God somewhere, somehow,  
performing some amazing magic trick  
that grabs our attention...

What we really need is a God who is here, with us, right now,  
“knee deep in the muck and misery and marvel of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

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And this, my friends, is the good news of the season of Advent.

God IS coming, to be with us right now, whatever right now means  
for you.

If it means fatigue—God will be with you.  
If it means fear—God will not abandon you.  
If it means frustration, or doubts about your future—God is going  
to come to you.

And God promises to show up for you in ways that you do not  
expect.

Look again at the FOUR TIMES that Jesus says the master might  
return.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, “Message in the Stars,” in his book *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

The master of the house might come  
                                   “in the evening,  
                                   or at midnight,  
                                   or at cockcrow,  
                                   or at dawn...”

It sounds like Jesus is just rattling off times of day and night.  
 But do you remember where else we hear about those four times?

In the very next chapter of Mark!  
 The Passion narrative.  
 When Jesus shares the last supper with his disciples, what time  
 does he do this?

“When it was evening...” Mark writes.

And then they go to Gethsemane, and the disciples cannot stay  
 awake—they keep falling asleep. Why do they keep falling asleep?  
 Because it’s...midnight...the middle of the night!

And then Jesus is arrested,  
                   and Peter follows him, and Peter denies knowing him,  
                   and what happens after Peter denies Jesus for the third time?

“The cock crowed...”

Are you following this?  
 Evening, midnight, cockcrow...

And then Jesus is taken before Pilate.  
 Do you remember what time Jesus goes before Pilate?

“As soon as it was morning...” Mark writes.

Evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn...these are NOT just random times of day and night that Jesus is talking about in our text.

He's talking about the last night of his life!  
He's talking about his journey to the cross.<sup>2</sup>

I think Jesus is saying that if you and I want to find God,  
if we want to see God in action,  
if you really want to pay attention to what God is up to...  
in this season or any season--  
go find a place where someone  
is carrying a cross.

And don't just go as a spectator. Go as a participant.

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A member of one of my former congregations once shared with me a story from his family.

Many years ago, one of his sisters died of cancer.  
She was still in her 40s, and it was, needless to say, a terrible blow to the family.

At one point she was in the hospital, being treated for her illness.  
And I can only imagine the fatigue that she felt.

Fatigue from the chemo.  
Fatigue from always making trips to the hospital.  
Fatigue from wondering what would happen next in her life.

She would have had every reason to be tired, and focused just on herself, and making it through the day...

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to David Lose for this insight about the connection between this text and the Passion narrative in Mark, found at "In the Meantime...", <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/advent-1-b/>.

Do you know what she decided to do in that hospital room?

She wrote a note of thanks.

Not a note to her doctors or nurses—although she DID make a point to thank them all later.

No, on this occasion she wrote a note *to the chef in the hospital kitchen*.

She wrote to him, complimenting the chef on the food that he had prepared for her to eat during her hospital stay.

Now...how many of you have been in the hospital before,  
either staying there yourself, as a patient,  
or staying there because a loved one was a patient?

- And how many of you, during your hospital stay, wrote a thank you note for your food?
- And how many of you, either quietly or loudly, COMPLAINED about the hospital food?

So it comes as no surprise that this chef was DUMBFOUNDED to receive such a note. He went up to her hospital room, and told her that in all his years of cooking for a hospital, no one had EVER written him a note to say thank you for the food.

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What are you paying attention to these days?

Where are you looking for God to show up in your life these days?

May I suggest that you and I focus our attention on how we can be the most GRACIOUS people we can be... just like that former church member's sister was, from her hospital room?

In the midst of a society that's getting CRANKY right now, in the midst of a time when any of us can feel overwhelmed right now... what if we made graciousness our primary focus?

In every encounter, in every interaction,  
 with every person we see and every word we speak,  
 we pay attention to the cross someone else is carrying,  
 and how much GRACE we might be able to show  
 them...

Because that's what the season of Advent is preparing us for,  
 right?

The day when God shows US more grace than we can imagine.  
 The day when God's grace is born into this world as a child.  
 The time when God's grace came among us,  
 teaching and healing and then carrying his cross—  
 not just for his people,  
 but for all people.

Do you know what it's like for the grace of God to capture your attention, to be your entire focus, for how you live your life?

A number of years ago, Bill Moyers created a documentary film on the hymn "Amazing Grace,"

In the film, there's a scene that takes place at Wembley Stadium in London.

This is back in the late 1980's, and a variety of musical groups have gathered at Wembley Stadium to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Nelson Mandela.

For twelve hours, groups like Dire Straits have blasted the crowd through banks of speakers. They cry for more, and curtain calls take place. It looks to all participants like everything is building up toward a crazy and chaotic crescendo at the end.

What the fans DO NOT KNOW is that the promoters of the event have scheduled not a rock band, but an opera singer named Jessye Norman to be the closing act.

The film cuts back and forth between scenes of the crowd in the stadium and Jessye Norman being interviewed, discussing the hymn "Amazing Grace" with Moyers.

Finally, the time comes for Norman to sing.

A single circle of light follows Norman, a majestic woman, wearing a flowing African dashiki, as she strolls onstage.

There's no back-up band. It's just Norman.

And the crowd is restless.

Alone, a capella, Jessye Norman begins to sing, very slowly.

And a remarkable thing happened in Wembley Stadium at that moment.

Thousands of raucous fans fall silent at the sound of a hymn!

By the time Norman reaches the second verse—

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

And grace my fears relieved...’

—the soprano has the crowd in the palm of her hand.

By the time she reaches the third verse, what do you think the crowd is doing?

They're singing along!  
They're digging far back in nearly lost memories for words of grace that they heard long ago.<sup>3</sup>

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It is one of the things that I miss the most right now.  
The ability to sing safely, in this room, with all of you.

We'll be able to do it again.  
I don't know when, it might still be a while...  
but we'll be able to do it again.

In the meantime, before we can all sing together in this room,  
may I remind you that your life itself can be a song of grace?

Your life and my life can be, every day--  
a way of showing God's grace is real,  
a way of showing God's grace is coming,  
a way of showing God's grace is for everyone.

Even when we're tired,  
our lives can be God's grace for others—  
every single day, at any time of day....

I'll let you work out the details from here.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> As told by Philip Yancey, in "What's So Amazing About Grace?", Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.