

## ***Keep Awake!***

A Sermon Preached by the  
Reverend Gale W. Robb  
November 30, 2008  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Isaiah 64:1-9  
Mark 13:24-37

On her latest album, singer Norah Jones does a duet with Dolly Parton called, "Creepin' On In." The verses are about water, the moon, and love, and the refrain goes like this, "And once it has begun, won't stop until it's done sneakin' in." That's how I've been feeling about the holiday season for about a month, especially since at least two radio stations have been playing Christmas music since Halloween, and, indeed, "it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go." Right about now, I'd like to just sneak on in to the manger and wait there for the birth of the Christ child.

But there will be no quietly creeping toward the manger this year, at least not this first Sunday in Advent. The Gospel of Mark has no room for sentimentality and nostalgic memories of Bethlehem, with shepherds, wise men and stars. Mark's Gospel doesn't sweeten the coming of God with a baby in a manger and angels singing "Glory to God in the Highest." Rather when the writer of Mark looks to the skies, he sees the sun and moon darkened, stars falling from the heavens, and in the midst of it all, the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. While the manger scene might put one to sleep in heavenly peace, Mark's vision produces insomnia. Is it any wonder we are cautioned to keep awake?

As you know by now, Advent always begins with an apocalyptic text, and Mark certainly gives us one of the best, complete with very vivid image of the end times. Now, undoubtedly, sayings about the coming of the Son of Man were circulated independently in early Christianity, and the writer of Mark would have been familiar with them. Predictions of the appearance of the Son of Man were based on imagery from the prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel, all of which foretold chaos in the cosmos of light and dark ordered in the creation story in Genesis. The apocalyptic book of Daniel includes references to the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven to ascend to the divine throne. Claiming these texts, Mark reminds his readers that the coming of God among us is not always as docile as the image of the baby in a manger that we rush to embrace this time of year.

Apocalyptic literature is described by one writer as "an unveiling of the world that lies behind this world. It's a revelation that tells about the transition

from this age to the next.”<sup>1</sup> But what are we to make of the signs and promises in the apocalyptic literature when we don’t really know how to read it? One commentator notes that, “A lot of us have been secularized enough by now that our view of the world has flattened out, and the Second Advent of Jesus Christ doesn’t fit into a flattened-out world very well.” And because it doesn’t fit, “we leave it to those . . . Christians who have turned apocalyptic speculation into a billion-dollar industry – prophecy buffs with their computer charts and wrong predictions that are then folded back into new predictions in the kind of prophetic improvisation that (someone has called) ‘apocalyptic jazz.’”<sup>2</sup> Don’t you think it’s interesting that there seems to be a sort of “supreme historical arrogance by which our age assumes that something as important as the end of the world should necessarily happen while we’re around?”<sup>3</sup>

Interviewed in *Christian Century* a couple of years ago, scholar Barbara Rossing, who wrote a great book entitled *The Rapture Exposed*, was asked, “How should Christians talk about apocalypse?” She responded by saying, “We can ask where apocalyptic moments are happening today and how such experiences transform us, since apocalypses are also about transformation.” At that time, she talked about Hurricane Katrina as a kind of apocalypse, noting that, “it pulled back a veil and showed us something that maybe we hadn’t been able to see. That’s the root meaning of the word *apocalypse* – pulling back a curtain to expose something, showing the difference between illusion and reality.”<sup>4</sup> In the case of Hurricane Katrina, it revealed a country badly divided along the lines of race and poverty. And when you think about it, more private, or individual apocalypses happen all the time – lives torn apart by illness or death, families torn apart by violence or addictive behaviors.

How many more apocalyptic moments have we witnessed? How have they transformed us? Or have they?

Advent says wait. And watch. And keep awake because, as Jesus tells the small group of disciples gathered around him, no one knows the day or the hour that God will choose to come among us, neither angels in heaven or the Son of God. All those predictions of the end times that various groups claim to have figured out are just that – predictions. We remain in the dark, and being in the dark – carrying the weight of not knowing – can cause any number of human responses, from drowsiness to insomnia, from sweet dreams to nightmares.

Jesus says it is like the one who sets out on a journey and leaves the slaves in charge of the household. They are not left without instruction. Each has a job to do, including the doorkeeper who is to keep watch for the householder’s return. It always reminds me of teenagers – my own included – leaving home, or being left home alone for the first time. Or me – when my husband is going to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “Between Two Advents: In the Interim,” *Christian Century*, December 6, 2000, pp. 1270-1272.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Byassee, “Relax, He’s Coming Soon,” *Pulpit Resource*, October, November, December 2008, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Rossing, “End Game,” *Christian Century*, November 14, 2006, pp. 22-25.

out of town for a week or so! Once in a while, it's great to be left home alone. You can eat or drink whatever you want whenever you want, you can leave the housework undone, read or watch television half the night and sleep until early afternoon. You can ignore all of the tasks that were left in your care. But at some point, the house begins to need attention, the cupboards are bare, the dust bunnies are accumulating under the bed, the plants are dying from inattention, and the dog has moved in with the neighbors. If nothing else, you might begin to long for the order that prevailed before you had the house to yourself, or to wish that somebody would go to the grocery store or get you up in the morning in time for work or that 8:00 class.

As the servants left at home, the choice is, of course, always ours. We are not left without instruction either. Feed the hungry, provide clothing and shelter for those who have none, visit those in prison, care for the most vulnerable among us. We can choose to be faithful servants, doing the work that we've been given, or we can just ignore the possibility of the householder coming home to find us asleep, chores left undone, the house a mess, the garden overgrown and full of weeds, the household hungry and cold.

Advent demands faithfulness. And faithfulness demands that we keep awake in spite of the darkness, in spite of the cold, in spite of the uncertainty, in spite of our fear. Faithfulness demands that we pay attention to the tasks that we've been given, even when we're bored, especially when we're feeling overwhelmed. Advent, with its focus on waiting and watching, with its natural rhythm of growing darkness, is a good time to remember what faithfulness looks like.

I always think of the Dr. Seuss book, "Horton Hatches the Egg," as a wonderful reminder of what it means to wait, and what it means to be faithful. Remember that Horton the elephant is unswayed by attempts to dislodge him from his egg-sitting duty. "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful. One hundred percent." He perseveres through bad weather, teasing and threats on his life. He remains faithful through seasickness and sideshows until the egg hatches and a new life is there in Horton's image. Faithfulness for Horton means abiding by his word, it means staying the course, finishing the race no matter what the outcome is. Faithfulness means waiting out the tough times, paying attention to the task at hand instead of being sidetracked by the easy alternative.

But if Advent compels us to wait, it also compels us to watch for signs of hope, to live beyond the darkness and the cold, beyond the uncertainty and the fear, into the hope. Given the state of the world, it can be challenging to find hope. We don't have to look very far for apocalyptic signs, for a staggering and paralyzing assessment of what we're up against when we try to live beyond the fear into the hope.

In her book entitled *Small Wonder*, author Barbara Kingsolver suggests that "rather than feeling hopeless, like a screen door banging in a hurricane, we should be the ones to bang and bang on the door of hope and refuse to let anyone suggest that no one is home." She goes on, "What I can find is this, and so it has to be: conquering my own despair by doing what little I can. Stealing

thunder and tucking it in my pocket to save for the long drought. Dreaming in the color green, tasting the end of anger. Don't ask me for the evidence. The possibility of a kinder future, the existence of God – these are just two of the many things that fall into the category I would label 'impossible to prove, and proof is not the point.' Faith has a life of its own."<sup>5</sup>

The life that faith lives is here, in this community and other communities around the world, as each week another Advent candle will be lighted. Today we light one for hope, and then one for peace, one for love, one for joy. Week by week, day by day the darkness will be illumined. Week by week, day by day, this community will stand against the darkness, as it has for over one hundred and fifty years, by doing, as Barbara Kingsolver says, the little that we can. By God's grace, the little that we can do – and have done faithfully – has changed lives. It has been hope to communities and individuals seemingly forgotten by everybody else. It is what we will continue to do to be a community where faith lives.

The late Henri Nouwen had beautiful words for life in community. He wrote, "The whole meaning of the Christian community lies in offering a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and darkness. That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love, even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we claim that God is a God of life, even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment (is the meaning of Christian community.)"

That's the promise, the sign of hope. So tuck some thunder in your pocket, dream in the color green, taste the end of anger. Advent challenges us to live in such a way that our waiting reveals God to the world. To live with renewed expectancy, to offer rekindled hope, is to prepare the world to see God in our midst. May it be so for each of us, for all of us, this Advent season. Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Susan Andrews, Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder*, New York: HarperCollins, 2002, p. 264.