

Apocalypse Now?
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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14:50

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Mark 13:24-37

There was a famous study done at Harvard a while back called The Invisible Gorilla. Maybe you heard of it.

The study took a group of test subjects and showed them a video of people milling around and passing a basketball back and forth. The study subjects were to count the number of passes made between basketball players.

Meanwhile, about halfway through the two minute video, a man in a gorilla suit walks slowly through the basketball players, stops and beats his chest, and walks off. The gorilla is not hidden.

After the video is over, folks were asked how many times the players passed the ball. (the answer is 15.) And then folks were asked if they saw the gorilla. Fully half of them replied, "what gorilla?" (theinvisiblegorilla.com)

How could they miss it?!

They were not paying attention. Or rather, they were paying attention, but they couldn't see, they didn't notice. They were not awake to the thing of wonder or absurdity coming across their path.

Advent is like that. We are not waiting for a man in a gorilla suit to show up. (Wouldn't that be an interesting pageant?) Rather, we are waiting for Jesus to come. But just as folks in the study could miss the absurd for the mundane, so we too can miss the miraculous in the midst of the distractions.

"Keep alert," says Mark. Keep awake.

Our scripture has a lot of apocalyptic language in it this morning. Our text talks about the end of the world.

"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."

Why? When the gospel of Mark was written it did seem like that to the author Mark and his contemporaries. You see Mark is the earliest written gospel, (the gospels are not arranged in the Bible in the order in which they were written.)

Mark was written during time of great strife and fear and catastrophe. In 70 CE (AD) there was a huge revolt in Jerusalem led in part by Jewish separatist factions. Roman authorities put down the revolt and in doing so destroyed the Temple, the center of Jewish life, religious leadership and connection to God. Thousands of people died. The Jewish people were cast out of Jerusalem not allowed to return and this was the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora or

dispersion that continued for millennia and is part of the reason for the creation of Israel almost 2000 years later. It was about as big a cataclysm as you can imagine.

In the midst of this crisis, the seeming end of the world, the author of Mark was writing about Jesus. Christians at that time thought Jesus would be coming back, right away, because certainly the end times would look and feel like this.

“Keep awake. Be ready.” Watch for Jesus since we don’t know when he is coming but we can see the signs.

As the centuries have gone by we have used these texts in Advent to think about how we prepare for Jesus coming now into the world. Advent is both thinking about Jesus’ original arrival, and Jesus’ coming again. So we hold both lenses up to the world as we read today’s text.

This morning I am not so concerned about what destruction and apocalyptic tendencies we see in the world around us right now. We certainly could list a few, or more than a few. I’m not so interested in the second coming but rather setting the stage for Advent and how we get ready for it. I’d like to ask you some questions about how you prepare for this Advent season. And to encourage you not to miss what God would gift you with in Advent.

Why is it so important to keep watch? Because if we don’t we might miss it, miss the opportunity, this once-a-year opportunity that we celebrate. We might miss the opportunity to meet Jesus as he comes to us, Emmanuel, “God with us.” To be sure to experience it, we have to pay attention.

Have you ever seen those bumper stickers that read: Jesus is coming. Look busy!

This morning I’m going to tell you the opposite. Jesus is coming. Don’t be so busy. Pay attention. Get ready so you can see the signs. And that takes paying attention. And paying attention to the right things.

I realized the not too long ago that living in Plymouth for the last few years has made me a better driver. Plymouth, being as old as it is, has a lot of narrowish roads and some unconventional intersections. Getting around downtown can be challenging and there are some places where it is nearly impossible to make a left (and sometimes even to make a right!)

The only way it works is that drivers regularly stop and let other drivers turn or cross. It took me a while to notice this. And then, after I noticed, it took me even longer to get the hang of it, to be a good citizen driver as it were. That’s because letting people in means paying attention, not just to myself, or the road in front of me, but to the other people around me. I have to stop ahead of time, pause from my own thoughts, get out of my own little bubble, and see something new, something outside of me. It is a new way of paying attention, of preparing the way maybe, for traffic harmony.

And now, not always, but often, I participate in the working out of Plymouth’s traffic harmony.

In the same way, we only see Jesus, the arrival of Jesus, the Advent of God’s love breaking into our world, if we pay attention. If we pay attention to the right things. We have to keep awake. Be ready. To not be distracted by the basketballs and miss the gorilla. To not be distracted by the cultural Christmas crush and miss the Light of the World. Keep watch. For the one is coming. The one of peace, the one of love, the one of hope.

If we push and shove to maintain our place in line at the store, we won't see the face of God, we will only see the everyday competition and consumerism of our times,

If we see only lists and jobs and house cleaning and relatives needs and...and...and, we will miss the Spirit alighting in our midst.

Jesus tells us that the Coming of Christ is like the master coming back from a trip. Unexpected, we never know quite when. Perhaps returning in the quiet of starlight and silence of night breathing.

I encourage you, keep watch. Keep awake in these times. Keep awake so that Advent and indeed Christmas and the spiritual meaning they bring are not stolen from you. Keep watch. As commercials worm their way into your home as mountains of mail, keep awake so that no one or nothing steals your energy, yourself in this time. This can be a time to spend extra time as a family, celebrating what you have and the miracle to come. To set aside time in the evening to be together instead of evenings spent looking for the list of desired gifts.

Keep awake! This can be a time to celebrate the life we each have whether partnered or alone. A time of solitude, preparedness, quiet. To wait for the footprints of God to come. Keep awake so that spirit might visit.

A number of years back we were supposed to have the most wonderful meteor shower in 100 years. The Leonid meteor shower was to have been an awesome display of shooting stars culminating at 5 in the morning. At the time I lived in mid-Michigan and when I got up at 4:30 am, it was an awesome display of ground fog. I could see nothing.

But later that day I talked with my dad who lived in Rhode Island at the time. He and his wife and my two stepsisters got up early and bundled up and went outside. All was dark in their subdivision and very quiet. My dad said it was as if no one was living there, only streetlights and damp pre-dawn darkness.

They stood in the backyard and looked up to the sky wondering if it had been worth leaving their warm beds. All of the sudden they could see small shooting stars, the first ones like sparks zipping across the sky. Then, about a minute later, there was a huge star that blazed all the way across the sky, joyfully streaming a trail of light and glory. And my dad said at that moment from all around he heard these voices all say, "Oh and Ah."

My family wasn't the only ones up; all these neighbors were outside in the dark watching the sky as well. Watching the stars in their glory. Watching God's fireworks in action.

"Keep awake," Jesus tells us, "keep watch."

Now I know the whole neighborhood was not outside with my family. There were many asleep in their beds, not knowing or perhaps not caring, that this marvelous, mystical event was decorating the sky above their heads. They missed it. They were not awake. God's star-lit gift passed them by.

You know, it is easy to miss Christmas, the true Christmas in the midst of all else. It is easy for it to be taken away, like a thief carrying it off in the night. Keep watch!

Keep awake, for the one is coming. Don't let the crush of the season crowd out all that is meant to be in this time of Advent. Keep awake, prepare, for the One is coming. And with God's blessing, the child of peace will be born in you.

Amen.

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