

Longing to Keep Awake
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14:57

"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." [1] To begin exploring this passage, we need to all imagine the scariest figures we possibly can—Frankenstein, Dracula, Zombies, Werewolves, or a fire-breathing Dragon maybe. Imagine a figure that will strike fear and terror in the heart of anyone who has the misfortune of meeting it. These figures of our collective imaginations allow us to glimpse aspects of the Son of the Man Jesus speaks about in Mark.

Because for most Jews living in Jesus' time, the Son of Man was a well-known but mysterious figure of hope and liberation. The Son of Man was powerful and terrifying. Jesus' contemporaries would have recognized the Son of Man from the Book of Daniel. Daniel was exiled with the rest of the Jews, living far from home in a foreign country. So Daniel said that the Son of Man would come to save them—to judge their oppressors and rescue the faithful. [2]

The Son of Man makes another important appearance in the Book of Revelation. This time, John of Patmos, the author of this wonderfully strange book, explicitly identifies Jesus as the Son of Man. We even get a description of what the Son of Man looks like. John describes his vision of Jesus as a figure "clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair are white as wool, white as snow; his eyes are like a flame of fire, his feet are like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice is like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he holds seven stars, and from his mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face is like the sun shining with full force." [3] John tells us that when he saw Jesus as the Son of Man, he "fell at his feet as though dead." [4]

John's reaction is not that surprising. Who wouldn't be shocked and terrified? This image of Jesus as the Son of Man is not the image most of us probably picture when we think of Jesus. You and I probably picture Jesus as a kind, loving, maybe sometimes feisty teacher. Or in this season, we are looking forward to that cute, cuddly baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. We sing hymns like "What a Friend we have in Jesus." We teach our children that Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.

But this Son of Man with fiery eyes, a face that could blind you, and a sword sticking out of his mouth? Thanks, but no thanks. Most of us would probably not find much comfort in this. But it ends up that this terrifying image of the Son of Man was comforting to the exiled and oppressed Jewish people in Daniel's time. And it was comforting for the early Christians in John of Patmos' time persecuted by the Roman Empire. This image was not only comforting; it was uplifting and encouraging. The people were oppressed and suffering. They needed a warrior, someone who would return to earth from the heavens to take up the sword on their behalf. They needed the Son of Man to liberate them and give them hope that God hears their cries and does something about them. It may be an image that doesn't speak much to us, but it might, if we were also in desperate need of a savior.

For sorrowful, oppressed people their savior should be scary and intimidating. Their savior has to be tough enough to scare those in power. After all, if you are a small sect up against an Empire, it may help to have the Son of Man as your secret weapon. These texts about the Son of Man in Mark, Daniel, and Revelation are still important for oppressed Christians around the world, whether they are workers striking in Brazil or believers jailed in China. The image of

Jesus as the Son of Man, a strong savior who can literally accomplish their release, offers hope and reassurance that God will one day rescue them from their oppressors.

In our scripture from Mark, Jesus instructs the disciples to watch out for the return of the Son of Man. Jesus tells them that even he doesn't know the hour that the Son of Man will appear but they should remain alert and keep awake. Our text for today is one of the last important lessons Jesus teaches his disciples in the Gospel of Mark. It's one of the last times Jesus is able to instruct his followers since all too soon he will be gone. So Jesus gives them hope by telling them that the Son of Man will return one day to free the people. Jesus will die soon, but he urgently tells the disciples to keep their heads up, to stay the course even when he is no longer with them. Jesus tells them, "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." [5]

But the disciples fail, they don't keep awake and they just don't seem to get it. When Jesus proclaims this urgent message of hope and salvation, they just take a nap. Jesus cries in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking God to take his cup away from him. He's sad and afraid. He tells his disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake." The disciples fall asleep on the job repeatedly, they fail at this small request Jesus asked of them. This very human picture of Jesus shows that maybe he just needed some of his best friends at his side for some moral support at the end, and they disappoint him and walk out on him.

Mary Oliver wrote a poem entitled "Gethsemane" and speaks of the failure of the disciples. She writes,

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe

The wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move, maybe

The lake far away, where once he walked as on a blue pavement,

Lay still and waited, wild awake.

Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not

Keep that vigil, how they must have wept,

so utterly human, knowing this too

must be a part of the story. [6]

It is so easy for us to pass judgment on the disciples, to say with moral superiority that we would have stayed awake with Jesus in the Garden. We would not have failed Jesus' request. We could have drank some coffee or set our cell phone alarms clocks to wake up when Jesus came back from his prayers. Hopefully we know better, and we know that the human frailty of the disciples is part of who we are too.

The Son of Man instructs us to keep awake, to stay watchful, to be prepared for his arrival. But sometimes we can be so absorbed in waiting for something to happen and watching for the signs of the times that we ignore what's going on around us here and now.

One of my favorite places in the entire world is Ocracoke Island, North Carolina. Ocracoke is the last island in the Outer Banks, a rather secluded vacation spot where my aunt and uncle have a beach house. My family has gone on many a vacation there and one of our traditions is to go out onto the beach at night to stargaze. We pile into the rusted out Chevy and head to the furthest beach on the island, where there are no houses and no lights except for the moon

and the stars and the headlights of cars you occasionally pass on the road. When spending a night on the beach, it feels like you can see every star in the sky. So we listen to the ocean and watch the stars, feeling connected to each other, to God, and to the universe.

A few summers ago, we ventured out onto the beach at night. I, of course, didn't get a beach chair since I'm the youngest and always get the short end of the stick. So I brought my beach blanket and laid it on the sand happily looking up at the stars. But as the night wore on, I suddenly experienced this creepy feeling that I was being watched. I looked at my family in the moonlight and saw nothing out of the ordinary, so I grabbed my flashlight and scanned the beach hoping I was wrong.

My light fell on the biggest sand crab I have ever seen in my life six inches from where my head had been, crawling around on my blanket. He had his claws outstretched with his beady black eyes looking right at me. I leapt up and started screaming with a few obscenities thrown in for good measure about how I could have been mortally wounded since everyone was too selfish to give up their beach chairs. My family just laughed.

This near death experience with the sand crab ruined my evening of stargazing. But you see, I was so absorbed in staring at the heavens that I forgot to pay attention to my surroundings until it was almost too late. I was looking for shooting stars streaking across the sky, and in my pursuit of these shooting stars, this ill-tempered sand crab almost killed me.

Jesus tells us to stay alert and to keep awake. But I don't think he meant for us to be so absorbed in watching for the Son of Man to return in the clouds from the heavens above that we should neglect what's happening to us and all of creation here on earth. We should not neglect the plight of our brothers and sisters who are still oppressed and downtrodden. We should not neglect the importance of nurturing our faith community and spreading the light and love of Christ beyond our walls. We still long for peace and justice in our world, centuries after Jesus preached to his disciples.

As this is the first Sunday of Advent, we are filled with hope for what is to come. We look forward to Christmas with expectation and wonder. Maybe this Christmas we'll stay awake like Jesus told us. We'll begin the hard work of making the Kingdom of God rule our world. We'll work for the reign of the Prince of Peace. In the end, the Son of Man will come to us this Christmas, but he will be like a lamb and not like a lion.

And isn't this what Christmas is all about? The powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up. If we truly identify Jesus as the Son of Man, then we know that the Son of Man is actually a tiny infant. Even though we may expect the terrifying Son of Man to come on the clouds from heaven, we get a vulnerable baby born in Bethlehem. God manifests God's own self in the weakest human form possible. God could have come to us as the scary awe inspiring Son of Man we all imagined together, but God doesn't.

Our very images and notions about what it means to be powerful or weak are called into question when the Son of Man comes to us as that helpless infant in a manger in Bethlehem. God is certainly full of surprises. Amen.

[1] Mark 13:27

[2] Daniel 7:14

[3] Revelation 1:13-16

[4] Revelation 1:17

[5] Mark 13:37

[6] Mary Oliver, "Gethsemane" in Thirst.