

The Second Baptist **Pulpit**

**“We Wait in Hope”
Mark 13:24-37
November 30, 2008
First Sunday of Advent**

Dr. Brent Beasley

Second Baptist Church
4680 Walnut Grove Road
Memphis, Tennessee 38117
(901) 682-3395
www.2ndmemphis.org

Most of us do not need to be told to “keep awake” during this time of year. This is the first Sunday of Advent, and traditionally the scriptures for today focus on waiting—waiting for the coming of God, the coming of Christ—the first coming and the second. Waiting and the need to keep awake while we wait.

But I don’t think during this holiday season anybody could accuse any of us of oversleeping, sleeping the days away. We might be accused of the op

posite, actually—overscheduling, running but getting nowhere, like a hamster in its wheel.

This is the time of year when we are right in the thick of taking our kids to sports practices and choir rehearsals and dance lessons, and we in the church tend to join right in with that rhythm of activity with all of our programs in full gear—youth group activities and children’s programs and basketball leagues and adult Bible studies and concerts and programs and parties.

With all there is to do to get ready for the holidays—both secular and sacred—nobody really needs to tell us to “keep awake.” We may actually need to hear more about going to sleep, resting from our hyper-caffeinated state of busyness. The last thing many of us need right now is a stimulant.

We have people getting up at 5:00 am Friday morning, the day after Thanksgiving, to line up with all the other crazy people to get into a Wal-Mart. You’ve probably heard about the scene at a Wal-Mart in New York where 2,000 people were crushing up against the doors while they waited for them to open at 5:00.

The crowd busted down the doors and ran over and trampled a waiting employee. He was actually killed, crushed to death, while the crowds rushed in around him and over him, anxious to get to their shopping.

Do we really need Jesus to tell us to wake up right now, or do we need him to tell us to calm down?

Here’s what I think we need to remember: while our busyness may be pointed toward the Christmas holiday, it is not necessarily pointed toward the coming of the Christ child.

[Lillian Daniel, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1]

And in that sense, this scripture from so long ago reads us, reads the signs of our times, and recognizes that in Advent we may indeed be asleep to what matters most.

There is an old fable about a far-off land ruled by a tyrant who had an ironclad grip over all parts of his kingdom, except for one frustrating area. He was unable to destroy the people’s belief in God. He summoned his counselors and put the question to them: *Where can I hide God so that the people will end up forgetting him?*

One counselor suggested that God be hidden on the dark side of the moon. This was debated for some time but voted down because it was believed that one day the wise ones would discover a means of space travel and God would be found again.

Another advisor came up with idea of burying God beneath the depths on the ocean floor. This was voted down for basically the same reason – it was felt that knowledge would lead to the discovery of God even in the deeps.

Finally, the oldest and wisest of the counselors had a flash of

insight. *I know*, he said, *why don't we hide God where no one will ever think of finding him?* He explained: *If we hide God in the ordinary events of people's everyday lives they'll never find him.*

And so it was done – and they say that people are still looking for God even today.

[Richard J. Fairchild, Gratitude: A Necessary Attitude.]

It is easy for us to miss God in the world.

Like people who have lived next to the train tracks for years and no longer hear the sound of the train. After years in church, we get so used to Advent, to the coming of Christ, that we hardly even notice God in our lives anymore. Or if we do notice, it has ceased to jolt us awake and has just become a dull rumble in the background no different than the hum of the refrigerator.

We may not be physically asleep, quite the opposite, but in our wakefulness to everything else, we may be asleep to coming of Christ into our lives. And so we need this wake-up call from the Gospel of Mark. We've got to be alert, to keep awake, so we don't miss the coming of God into our lives. In the thirteenth chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus is talking

about the end of days, the second advent, the second coming of Christ. This chapter of Mark is often called *the little apocalypse* because of its imagery and focus on the end of time.

It might seem kind of strange that we always talk about Jesus' second coming at the beginning of the season of Advent—that we would begin our anticipation of the birth of Christ by being exhorted to wait for his coming again. It seems kind of out of order, because in the context of the Christian year, we are supposed to be awaiting his birth now.

But there is one respect in which it is completely fitting and makes sense. And that is that waiting for Jesus' second coming puts us squarely in the same boat as those who awaited the birth of the Messiah. Neither those who awaited the first coming of the messiah, nor those who now await his return, have any idea when he will appear or what exactly will happen when he does.

Maybe one way to think about the kind of waiting that Jesus is talking about here is to think about the difference between waiting for Christmas and waiting for Christ.

Obviously, we know exactly when Christmas will arrive: December 25. And we know pretty much what will happen when it does. We have plans, we know the script, and all we have to do is follow it.

But waiting for Christ to come—or to come again—is a different matter altogether. That kind of waiting requires something different and something more. Waiting for Christ requires an expectant watchfulness, because we never know when he will appear, and we don't know exactly what will happen when he does.

We don't know when.

Jesus says so clearly in verse 32, talking about his coming: *But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the father.*

Jesus was telling his followers these things because he knew what was going to happen. He knew he was going to be crucified. Then, just a few years later in the year 70, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. Added to that was the persecution of these new Christians by the religious and the political authorities and the tearing apart of families by differing loyalties.

Into this kind of a situation, false messiahs and false prophets were taking advantage of the fear and confusion. It's been that way ever since. False messiahs were claiming, *This is the second Advent; I am Christ returned.* And false prophets in these days were turning religion into a kind of almanac or astrology saying, *The signs are right; this is the end.*

And Jesus' words then spoke to the people in his absence as they waited for his return, as these words still speak to us as we wait for his return. *About that day or hour no one knows.* No one knows.

So, since you don't know when the time will come, he says, *Beware, be alert, keep awake,* so you don't miss his coming.

Be alert. Keep awake. It's a different kind of waiting, waiting for Christ, because you don't know when.

It's also a different kind of waiting because we don't know exactly what will happen when Christ does come. We don't know exactly what to expect.

Scientists have devised a game that proves how hard it is for us to notice one thing when we are expecting something else. Here is how it goes. They sit you

down at a table in front of an ordinary deck of cards, and they flash six cards at you, asking you to identify them as fast as you can—nine of diamonds, three of hearts, ace of spades—whoops! What was that last one? Then they repeat the exercise, slowing it down a little so you can get the ones you missed the first time.

The third time is so slow that you think you must be an idiot because there is one card you simply cannot identify. You think you know what it is, but you're not sure, and it's not until they lay the cards face up on the table in front of you that you can see what the problem is.

The card you couldn't identify is a six of clubs—only it's red, not black. The deck has been fixed. Someone has changed the rules and made that six of clubs red. And you couldn't see a red club because clubs are supposed to be black.

Our expectations can prevent us from seeing what is actually there. Barbara Brown Taylor, great writer and preacher, writes this:

I have often thought that the second coming would be wasted on me, because I have such a set notion about how it is supposed to be: the Son of Man, riding a

white horse with wings right out of the clouds—touching down on the White House lawn, maybe, or the skating rink at Rockefeller Center.

Only what if he comes as a Guatemalan Indian on a burro, or a Tibetan exile on a yak? What if he comes out of the housing projects of Richmond on a broken-down bicycle with dreadlocks down his back? Stranger things have happened, after all. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" Red [clubs] have always been hard to see. ["Apocalyptic Figs" in Bread of Angels, p. 157]

Be alert. Keep awake. Pay attention, because you don't know when he's coming, and you don't know exactly what will happen when he does come.

So Jesus gives a little parable about this: It's like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his assigned work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Jesus says, *Therefore, keep awake—for you don't know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.*

Keep awake or else he might find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

This is the word for us this morning. Keep awake or else the master might find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

Too many of us are already fast asleep. Even in our extreme wakefulness to everything else, we are fast asleep to the coming of Christ into our lives. To not be awake when the time is right, to miss it when the moment comes, to not be ready, is to have deep regret.

Morris West, an American novelist, has an interesting take on this. In his novel, *Clowns of God* (William Morrow and Co., 1981), he imagines that the pope has a revelation that Christ is returning for the final judgment. He shares this with the cardinals and they decide that it is best to say he is senile, so they exile him to the monastery at Monte Cassino.

The exiled pope, however, gets the message out to some people in Europe and tells them to start forming cell groups of Christians all over the world to prepare for the coming of Christ. As time passes and these cell groups begin to form, Christmas Eve approaches.

While the world brutalizes itself with wars and surfeits itself with excesses, one cell group meets in the hills of Bavaria to share the celebration of Christ's birth. An interesting Middle Eastern type joins them for the celebration and when he is asked if he is a believer, he says: *I am not a believer; I am he.*

Give us a sign, they say. If you were really he, you would say, "Ask and it shall be given."

Ask, he says.

Time, they say. Give us enough time to change the world, to beautify it, to cleanse it, to prepare it for you.

I accept, he says.

Then how much time do we have? they ask.

I won't say, he says. You have not much—but enough. Not much—but enough.

That answer just might send a little chill down our spines, because that's what we always want to know. How much time do we have?

[Prof. Dr. Dr. David Zersen, President Emeritus, Concordia University at Austin, Austin, Texas, November 27, 2005]

We want to know that we have enough time to say, *I'm sorry*.

We want to know that we have enough time to finally get around to doing what we always wanted to do.

We want to know that we have enough time to heal an old wound, to change direction, to say “no” next time instead of “yes,” to say “yes” next time instead of “no,” to stop being afraid.

We want to know that we have time to really love God someday the way we always wished we did..

How much time do we have?
Not much—but enough.

Be on guard, Jesus says. Be alert at all times. Wake up.

Not so you will know when to grab your crash helmet and canned goods and head for the basement but so you will know when the kingdom is near.

So you will not miss God when God comes.
Stand up and raise your head, the Bible says, for your redemption is drawing near.

There are all kinds of ways to wait. There's the woman standing on the side of the road on

Poplar waiting for the bus. There is the old man sitting in the doctor's office waiting room. There is the young woman waiting for the test results. There is waiting with resignation. There is the tense, dread-filled waiting of those whose hope is gone.

How shall we wait? I will say this: As wide awake as we know how. As fully alive as we can possibly be. We don't wait in fear or regret or resignation. We wait wide awake, we wait fully alive.

[Barbara Brown Taylor]

Like the little boy standing on the street corner, hearing the sound of the parade that is coming but is still out of sight, we wait on tiptoe, we wait full of expectation, we wait in hope.

We wait in hope—thanks to the one who has died, who is risen, and who will come again...and again, and again, and again.

Second Baptist Church
4680 Walnut Grove Road
Memphis, TN 38117-2599