

11.30.25 Sermon Transcript – Matthew 24:36-44

So this time four years ago, I had just gone into the operating room at Women's and Children's, and I was sitting up on that metal bed, and they were sticking the needle in my back to numb me up, because in just a short period of time, the doctor was going to open me up and bring the twins out into the world. And this, of course, was after having been in the hospital for two long months waiting for their arrival. Many of you remember that time that I was in there, and it was the longest two months in my life, waiting for them and praying that they would be able to arrive safely, that there would be no issues. But I spent that two months in anticipation, and I was awake a lot. I couldn't sleep very well. I mean, hospitals, as you probably know, are not the most comfortable places in the world. There's always people in and out. And I had to be hooked up to monitors for the babies to make sure their heart rates were okay for multiple hours a day. And, of course, I was just amped up, and I was anxious, worrying about them. So I stayed awake a lot in anticipation and in expectation. I was attentive to every little thing that happened along the way. But soon, they did indeed arrive, healthy and in one piece. In that season of waiting, there was so much uncertainty, and it was tempting at times to simply check out because it was overwhelming.

Well, today we enter into the season of Advent, a season where the church leans forward a little, where we light a candle on this Sunday. We light just one candle in the dark, and we refuse to give up hope. Jesus, in the Scripture passage today, speaks some words that maybe are not the most hopeful or encouraging or comfortable. He doesn't give us the story of the angels or the shepherds or the sort of familiar comforts that we feel when we hear the Christmas story. Instead, this season of anticipation, of Advent, begins with Jesus saying, "Keep awake. No one knows the day or the hour." This is not a gentle, peaceful beginning, but it is the beginning that we need.

So with this passage that June read this morning, we need to know a little bit about its context in order to help it speak more clearly to us. During this moment, it was, in fact, Holy Week. Jesus was in Jerusalem. The presence of Rome was everywhere. There were soldiers patrolling the streets. There were tax collectors doing their thing, collecting the emperor's wealth. There were temple authorities trying to keep the peace so Rome doesn't crack down on them. We see Pontius Pilate entering into the city in a grand processional. We see Jesus having entered in a not-so-grand processional – that's the story we hear on Palm Sunday.

But Jesus has just told his disciples that the temple, the center of their religious and social and political world, will be destroyed. And he's right, because 40 years later, the temple is in fact destroyed by Rome. It's leveled to the ground. And the disciples ask Jesus "When will these things happen? And how will we know?" They're not looking for a rapture timeline. That's not what this passage is about. (And of course, rapture is not even a biblical concept.) But they're scared. They're scared about what's coming. They can feel the tension in the air. And Jesus is speaking these words of what feels like doom to them. Their whole world feels like it's shaking. It feels like it's falling apart. And so they want to know, "Jesus, what can we expect? And how will we know what to do?" Jesus responds not with a date for when these things will happen, but instead he responds with a way of living. He says, "Stay awake, pay attention, and do not give in to despair."

Those are the words that Jesus gives to his disciples. He tells them empires are going to rise and they're going to fall. Institutions are going to shake and crumble. But God's future, the one that you are supposed to be looking for and paying attention to, is still healing. It's still unfolding. It's still coming, so don't get so caught up in all the other things that you miss it. He needs his followers not to sleep through God's kingdom coming. He needs them not to bury their heads in the sand or to lose themselves to distraction, which, I mean, that's a pretty big temptation.

I don't know about you, but when I get overwhelmed at the state of the world or things going on in my life, my first instinct is, is to one, go find a good distraction so I don't have to think about it or pay attention or better yet, go and take a nap. That is one of my major defense mechanisms. I'm like, I need to go lie down and close my eyes and pull the covers up over my head. And sometimes that is a good response. Sometimes my body needs rest and I can more readily face the world after I've had some rest. But I think more often for me, it's me trying to escape or avoid the world, or it's allowing myself to become numb or indifferent to what is going on around me.

This is what Jesus is warning his disciples against. Don't become numb. Don't become distracted. Don't become indifferent to the places where the kingdom of God is breaking in. Jesus says, as in the days of Noah, people were eating and drinking. That's what we heard in the passage. In other words, people were living numb, anesthetized, distracted, ignoring injustice, ignoring suffering, ignoring the ways in which God was showing up in the world. And it's not that eating and drinking are bad. It's that doing so was causing them not to pay attention. It was causing them to not be awake. They were spiritually asleep.

So Jesus calls his disciples and us today to live awake in a world that is full of uncertainty, not to go about as if everything is just fine, or getting lost in our own worlds of distraction, but to live awake in spite of and in the midst of the world's uncertainty. It's easy to shut down when the world feels shaky, to retreat inward, and to just stop expecting God to show up. But the season of Advent, says that God is still coming. That's what the word Advent means – coming. God is still coming. So stay awake for hope.

We hear in this passage two people are working in the field, and one is taken and one is left behind. And I mean, this passage is kind of frightening, and it's often been read as a frightening prediction. But Jesus here is not predicting or describing secret vanishings of one person versus another person. Instead, what he is talking about is two very different ways of living.

He says two people can be sharing the same field, the same daily routine, the same political reality, the same neighborhood, but one is aware of God and where God is showing up and one is not. There's not a difference in morality here. It's a difference in attentiveness. Who is the one who notices God's movement, where God is showing up, who recognizes where Christ is present, who is awake to hope? The season of Advent asks us to be people who notice, people who pay attention, who are looking for hope and trusting that they will find it.

Now, this is in Matthew, chapter 24, and Jesus' message here is not contained only to chapter 24. Here. Chapter 25 immediately follows. And some of you may be familiar with this passage. In the very next chapter in the same sermon Jesus goes on to say, "One day the king will come and he will

see the sheep and the goats, and he will divide them.” On the one hand, there's the sheep, those who cared for the poor, the vulnerable, the naked, the hungry. And Jesus says to him, “Come, whatever you have done for the least of these, you have done for me.” And then there's the goats. The goats are the ones who have not cared for the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned. They've completely ignored them. And Jesus says, “Go away for whatever you have not done for the least of these, you have not done for me.”

In other words, this sermon that we heard part of this morning continues on into chapter 25 and tells us something about the necessity of being awake, paying attention, and noticing where God shows up. The Christ we're waiting for is already walking towards us in our neighbors, in those who are vulnerable, in strangers. Jesus says, “Pay attention. Pay attention to where I will show up.”

We sang this song at the beginning of worship - Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending, and I love that song. But I do think there is an element missing in it. Advent vigilance, staying awake is not just about looking up at the sky, waiting for Christ to come on clouds descending. Rather, Advent vigilance is about looking around our own neighborhoods, our own community, and finding the ways in which Christ comes disguised in the people that the world, that Empire forgets. The immigrant, our unhoused neighbors, those who are struggling and hurting, those who are cast out, the child living in fear, the lonely elder, the person that we would rather avoid. That's where Advent noticing takes place. To stay awake in Advent is to notice Christ in every person who interrupts our comfort.

Hope's not abstract. Hope is embodied. Hope has a face, a human face. Hope meets us in all kinds of different places. I don't know if some of you saw it this past week, but Paula Kaufman wrote an opinion piece in the Charleston Gazette-Mail about how everyone deserves a place at the table. And she was writing about a real missing element since Manna Meal was no longer able to do indoor dining. A real element that is missing in our community has been that space for everybody to have a safe place to come in and sit down and have a place at the table and experience not just eating food, but human connection. She said, there's a place at the table for everyone. In my opinion, that's a really sacramental understanding of mission and ministry, and I think that's the kind of thing that Jesus is telling us to notice, to be awake to. How are we fostering the connections and the relationships in our community where we can witness the presence and the hope of Christ in a fuller way? Advent hope says “Pay attention. Christ is a whole lot closer than you might think.”

Now, Jesus' call to keep awake is not about anxiety. And don't I know that most of my staying awake has to do with anxiety of some sort! I'm thinking about something, I'm worrying about something, but that's not what Jesus is talking about here. It's staying awake, vigilant and paying attention. It's paying attention to the stories that people carry, attention to the needs that we would rather ignore in our community. It's paying attention to the slow work of justice. And when I say justice, I don't simply mean charity. I mean the act of working for a better society where all people are treated with equity and dignity. It means paying attention to the small signs of God's kingdom breaking in, right in front of us. Not in the big picture kind of thing, but right in those intimate moments that we share with others in a world that is just drowning in all kinds of

distractions. Being awake is a spiritual discipline. Hope requires noticing – noticing the person in front of us, noticing what God is already doing beneath the surface, noticing that the small acts of love have world shaping power.

It doesn't always feel like much in the moment, but when we think about an Advent candle, imagine if this sanctuary were entirely in the dark and we would have a flicker of hope from the candles. It does dispel the darkness, even just a tiny bit. The first Advent candle flickers quietly. It's a tiny flame, but here's a big promise in that flame. It says, pay attention. The light is growing. And as many of you know, when we finally get to Christmas Eve here at the end of the service, we'll all have candles and the light will get passed around until the sanctuary is lit up by the candles of hope that each of us hold as we proclaim that Christ is here in our midst.

Hope doesn't deny darkness, but it does defy darkness. When Jesus says the world is unpredictable, he's not trying to frighten us in this passage we heard, but he's preparing us to resist despair, to resist distraction, to resist giving up and just going to sleep. Our world is really uncertain right now in so many different ways, in our own personal lives and in our society and in the world. But God keeps breaking in. And that is the Advent hope. The world is messy, but the spirit keeps on stirring things up. The world is unjust, but love keeps rising up in unlikely places. Hope. Hope is not a naive denial of pain. Hope is not toxic positivity. But hope is the refusal to believe that pain has the final word or that suffering has the final word. Hope is stubborn and grounded. Hope is active and working. It keeps watch and it gets ready. So on this first Sunday of Advent, we keep awake. Not out of fear, not out of anxiety, but out of expectation. We keep awake because God keeps moving and God keeps healing, and God keeps lifting up those whom the world overlooks.

God keeps showing up in the unexpected moments, in the unexpected people and places. We keep awake because Christ is coming and also because Christ is already here in our neighbor, in the stranger, in the one the world says does not matter. Christ is present here in our worship and at this table. And not just at this table, but in the tables downstairs, in our dining room, whenever we share a meal and friendship. We keep awake because hope is on the horizon. But hope is also at our doorstep. Hope is not just at our doorstep, but it is also in our house. The night is long and dark, but dawn is coming. And if we stay awake, we will see Christ in the very places we once thought God could never appear. So let us keep awake, keep watch, and look for the presence of Christ. Amen.