

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Mark 13:24-37

<sup>24</sup> *“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
<sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.  
<sup>26</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.  
<sup>27</sup> 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.  
<sup>28</sup> “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth  
its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you  
know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until  
all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass  
away.  
<sup>32</sup> “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son,  
but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is  
like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his  
work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Therefore, keep awake—for you do  
not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow,  
or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I  
say to all: Keep awake.”*

My friends, advent is now upon us. If you were unaware of this, then I say to you, “Surprise!” In just a little over four weeks, on the day we set aside for this joyous occasion, we will celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Some of us are excited and getting everything ready at home to make that day special for us and those we love. Others are already filled with anxiety and are overwhelmed by the list of things they think they MUST accomplish in order to have the perfect Christmas celebration. And still others are filled with dread and grief because of the losses they’ve experienced in their lives—the loss of loved ones, the loss of jobs, the loss experienced because of brokenness and misunderstandings in relationships.

As with Thanksgiving, there is a spirit of sadness, even depression, knowing that chances are we will not be able to celebrate in our usual fashion, participating in our treasured traditions with friends and family because of Covid-19. The numbers of those getting sick with the virus and those needing to be hospitalized is alarming.

So, to protect those we love, family, friends, and yes, even our beloved church family, we know the right thing to do is to find alternative ways to celebrate this special day. In many ways, in spite of the promise of a vaccine, this feels like a dark time in the history of humanity. We pray daily for an end to this nightmare, and we search for hope.

Charlene Elizabeth Fairchild, wrote in “A Mustard Seed Christmas,” about this dark time in her life.

“It was the first Sunday in Advent and my husband, rather gingerly, brought up the subject of Christmas, knowing that I was immersed in the full bloom of grief. Mom had died on Labor Day and this was the first Christmas to be marked without her. I did not “feel” like Christmas.

“I remembered the reading from Romans that morning, ‘The night is far gone, the day is near, let us put on the armor of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ The season celebrating His birth and looking for His coming again was upon me and I was being called to participate. But it was beyond me to rejoice. As I said these things to my husband, he reminded me that God IS able even if I was not. He mentioned the parable of the mustard seed to me. God could take that little mustard seed and make of it something worthy. God could take that tiny seed of faith and grow it into a kingdom of hope.

“I felt as if I had been touched. I got up and went to the kitchen and rifled through my spices. Yes! There it was. My bottle of mustard seeds. I got one out and grabbed a piece of paper from the pad by our phone and taped that mustard seed to the center. I returned to the dining room, waving the paper triumphantly. ‘I’ve got it! I’ve got it! I CAN celebrate this year.’ My husband said, ‘Here, let’s put it up on the mantel. It’ll be our first Christmas decoration.’ Up it went. Every time I looked at it, I was reminded of the hope it symbolized and the faith it embodied. I couldn’t do it on my own. But God could. And God did!”

Hope is a theme we find in today’s scripture from Mark 13. In understanding the portion of text that was read for us, it would be helpful for us to take in more information found in chapter 13. Jesus, along with his disciples, was leaving the temple in Jerusalem after he was hit with a barrage of questions and accusations hurled at him by the Sadducees and Pharisees.

Once outside the temple, one of the disciples said to Jesus, “Look Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” to which Jesus replied, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.” Imagine the questions that statement must have conjured up in the disciples’ thoughts. They asked him, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”

In this text, often called the Olivet Discourse, Jesus talked a lot about two things: the end times and his second coming. Jesus was not trying to encourage his disciples to speculate about exactly when he would return by sharing these prophecies with them. Instead, he was urging all his followers to pay attention. Watch for deception. Watch out for yourselves. Watch during the difficult days ahead.

In the face of environmental, political, social and cosmic calamity — “Stay awake!” Jesus says. He speaks as though there is the possibility that the disciples, and we, will miss that which should be seen and known. Mark points out several times in his gospel that the disciples, although claiming Jesus to be the Messiah, did not seem to really recognize him in spite of his divine activity as witnessed right before their eyes.

The apocalyptic flavor of this text may distract us into thinking the time to watch for Jesus is some time out there somewhere down the road and not more immediate, leaving Christians questioning, if not now, then when? Jesus tells us here that the time to be alert and watchful for him is now. Doing so awakens us to needed hope for current life challenges, as well as the eternal promises of joy in a life yet to come.

Jesus tells us to watch for deception, meaning be on the lookout or be on guard against deception. If we think about that in terms of the current turmoil in our lives caused by COVID, then this should tell us to be on guard against fear, fear that everything is out of control, fear of living, fear that puts shackles on our efforts to be faithful to God in service, fear that robs us of dreams and joy. This fear threatens to deceive Christians into thinking God has abandoned us and questioning whether God really does have everything under control.

Watch out for deception, but also watch out for yourselves. The lies and doubts evil spreads about God during times such as these can weaken the boundaries of your soul, leaving you to drift away from the one who brings us hope. Strengthen your spirit by reading God's Word which will never die away and will always be relevant to our lives. Stay on the faithful course of God's instructions for your life. Pray without ceasing to the One who hears and answers every prayer, according to his timing and will, knows what is best for us. Worship the Lord.

Don't allow the fact that we cannot be in our lovely sanctuary during this special time of year keep you from worshiping God. Remember that ultimately the building is not the church, but we are. So, then also, turn to one another for support and encouragement. Even with COVID limiting our personal activities, we are still bound together in Christ's Spirit. We can be together in virtual worship, through virtual activities, by making phone calls and sending cards and letters to one another. Watch out for yourselves, and resist the things that threaten your relationship with God and each other.

Watch for the difficult days that lie ahead. We already know this COVID thing is not going away quickly. We're at least nine months into this pandemic and just when we thought it might be lessening its grip on us, a resurgence has arrived. Knowing this to be true, we must prepare to fight the battle of succumbing to the tyranny that threatens us, and we must do so for the long-haul.

Jesus knew the days that were ahead of him near the end of his ministry were going to be long and hard. He knew he would endure great suffering. He knew he would be abandoned by those who called him Teacher and friend. Yet Jesus never abandoned his mission. Instead he became even more passionate about his work of building God's kingdom. And when the end was near, Jesus fought the battle, clearly focused on God. Jesus never doubted that God was in control and that all things would work for good according to God's will. And so, it should be with us, trusting that God is in control and will ultimately get us through this dark period.

Jesus calls us to be alert, to be watchful, to stay awake, not for an apocalyptic event and his return, but for his breaking through the darkness that surely comes in our lives. He is here now as we fight this current battle with the pandemic, both the illness at the heart of it, and the restrictions and tribulations it is putting on our lives. He will be with us in whatever darkness we face. If we are awake to his presence, we have hope. If we are not, well, darkness wins. In this season of Advent as in every season of your lives, be watchful, stay awake, for Christ comes as hope to our lives. Amen.