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KEEP AWAKE

Matthew 24:36-44

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This passage has created a tremendous amount of attention and confusion. Essentially the entire doctrine of the rapture is based on this perplexing passage. It has generated two uber-popular book series and some truly terrible movies, starring Nicholas Cage, Kirk Cameron, and even Orson Welles. *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey was the bestselling non-fiction book of the 1970's. I remember the terrifying ending of that movie in which, I believe while preparing dinner in the kitchen, suddenly the mother was whisked away – leaving everyone behind. I regularly stayed with my mother in the kitchen for a few months after that!

To try and use this passage to construct some elaborate, detailed second-coming timeline is utterly misguided and even dangerous. Not the least of which it engenders all the wrong motivations for obeying the word of God – fear and the desire to escape while others remain in torment. Most clearly, however, because Jesus himself tells us he does **not know what is going to happen and when**, “About that day and hour no one knows neither the angels in heaven, nor the son!”

This means, right from the beginning, this passage must not be taken literally. He is using metaphor and speculation to try and make an important faith point, not a timeline of the end – and that is what we will spend the rest of the time exploring. The importance of keeping awake!

Even though we are not to take this literally, we always must take Jesus’ words seriously. And remaining spiritually alert is a regular theme in Jesus’ teachings.

In Mark’s Gospel, as Jesus emerges from the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see

these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

(Mark 13)

In the larger section of Mark 13 he admonishes the disciples five times to “Keep awake!” He knows we have the propensity to sleep walk through life, sometimes missing grand events and other times wandering into our own destruction.

Consider his reference to Noah and the flood. People are conducting their merry lives in the midst of a coming catastrophe.

Throughout history, humankind has done this through environmental collapse. Pulitzer Prize winning author, Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse*, describes the demise of the Greenland Viking society. They made their homes out of the plentiful sod found in two valleys there and raised sheep. Unfortunately, they didn’t realize this soil replenishes much more slowly than Nordic soil. As a result, over the course of centuries the farmland collapsed.

Furthermore, they never made good relations with the Inuit people. Instead they called them “Skræling,” which roughly translates into “wretches”. This was another fatal error because, as a result, the Vikings never learned the Inuit’s seal and whale hunting techniques. Eventually, starvation wiped out the entire population. This was a result of their utter failure as a people to be awake to the eroding soil over the course of centuries and awake to the promise of friendship with the Inuit.

In other words, the Greenland Vikings failed to treasure the blessings from God right in their midst – the soil and the Inuit people.

Jesus was that treasure from God, right in their midst, that people were completely oblivious to. He would be the resource that would help them

persevere the difficult days of Roman terror and persecution, but only if they were awake to the life he had to offer.

In the time of Jesus' birth, the Jews had long waited for a day of reckoning to come. A powerful day, like the flood that would wipe out the enemies of God's people and restore their sovereignty and peace. This seems like an absolutely reasonable hope! But any student of history can quickly see this was an endless, repeated hope. At various times they waited for the Egyptians, Assyrians, Seleucids, and then the Romans to be overthrown by God.

But Jesus is turning the expectations on their head. In this challenging passage, Jesus is saying God is not just coming for the Romans but for you... for everyone. We always think the reckoning is for other people and not for us. That is the point of the part "then two will be in the field, one taken and the other left." He is not speaking of a literal event (after all he said he did not know). He is simply reminding us all are coming to an accounting, so be ready!

In this passage, Jesus is exhorting us all to live our entire lives as if the day of the coming of the Lord will be at any moment.

Some of the most fun my brothers and I had was when my mother would leave for the day. We would build a fort out of blankets and sheets, make popcorn, rifle through the cabinets for cookies, down dozens of cokes, and essentially create a Cat-in-the-Hat catastrophe! Inevitably, we would mistime her return and would face multiple weekend groundings as a result. She was off working hard while we played all day. It didn't show any respect or consideration for her.

Remember what Jesus said to his disciples, when they fell asleep at Gethsemane? "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

The disciples were not the enemies of our Lord, but they showed a complete failure to appreciate his position, as my brothers and I did with my mother.

By this time I am sure you are wondering... What in the world this passage has to do with Advent! It appears in the Lectionary in this season to remind us of something fundamental about our Lord. Jesus not only came to earth long ago, but he is going to return again. Furthermore, we should live our entire lives as if this return could happen at any moment, because it could.

But this is not meant to put fear in our hearts for our eternal soul. Yes, an accounting is coming, but we know the end of the story. Jesus is going to be a different type of Messiah. Not a conquering king but a suffering servant. Not a rescuer only of Israel but a redeemer of the world. The accounting finds all of us in an infinite debt and, through God's grace, Jesus has paid for us all.

We all know that even worse than being yelled at is the look of disappointment. We don't want to see that look in Jesus' face or hear it in his voice and so we must do all we can to be watchful and prepared for his arrival.

This Advent text asks us to be ready for the coming Christ, not just at Christmas but at all times. It means observing this season with an additional sentiment. We should go through December with a sense of expectant joy. Absolutely! We need that.

But also precisely because of this expectant joy, because of the promise of the gift that is coming, we should live a life that is awake to the desires of our Lord, out of respect, out of thankfulness, not falling asleep when the Lord needs us most. It means not relying so much on the largess and mercy of God that we fail to have our spiritual houses in order when he returns. We want to show our Lord that we care.

Perhaps, we should start from the end. Imagine Jesus arrives at your door and he has this look of thankfulness and relief on his face.

What are you going to do this Advent to put that look on his face?

Amen.