

“Keep Awake”
Mark 13:24-37

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Early this year, when I resigned myself to celebrating Easter with Edgewood in an online worship service, I never thought that we would be doing the same for Advent and Christmas. In fact, in mid-March when we first moved online, I told you all, “If we can just do this for two weeks we’ll have the biggest Easter celebration we’ve ever seen.” And then as Easter came and went I thought, “That wasn’t so bad but I can’t wait for Christmas back to normal.”

With each twist and turn this year it’s become clear that not only are we not going back to normal anytime soon, but we’ve had the space and clarity to realize that going back to the old normal is not what we are longing for. We have learned too much about the impact of healthcare only for those can afford it when a virus arrives that does not care how much money you make as it attacks your body. We learned too much from the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor as three hundred years of racism spilled into the streets and into our homes, making us realize we refuse to go back to time when Black lives didn’t matter. We learned too much about what happens when we look out for ourselves at the expense of everyone else by refusing to mask up or practice social distance, making us realize that loving our neighbors requires sacrifice.

The mantra this year has been, “Let’s just get through 2020.” Well, here we are. We have one month left on the calendar, but in the church we’ve reached the start of a new year with the beginning of Advent. Advent is the beginning of the church calendar, our season of preparation for Christmas but also preparing for the year ahead of us as we wonder and dream what it means

for God to dwell among us in this moment, and how might God be calling us toward love and justice in this new year.

The Gospel of Mark reminds us to keep awake and alert - that the current time will soon pass away and all that will remain is God's word. The question then becomes what do we do as we wait and watch for this new year to emerge? Our Gospel suggests that we should not only be preparing to leave things behind, but we should be dreaming and envisioning what we are moving toward. When you walk away from something, it helps to know what you are walking toward, where you are heading. Otherwise you end up repeating the same old patterns in new ways.

This year we are called to walk away from oppression and toward liberation. Away from isolation and toward authentic connection. Away from scarcity and toward generosity. In order for these new realities to emerge, we must be able to name them, to picture them, to anticipate what our role in them will be and how our world might be transformed. In Advent we are awake to the realities of what is broken around us, and we are asked to dream about what is needed to bring about healing.

This has been a year of dreaming and longing for what comes next. Now we're here at the end of 2020. We know a vaccine is on the way. We know we will have a new president. We know change is coming. But what are we moving toward? What does God on earth look like in this new world? What vision are we casting for ourselves, for our church, for our communities?

Often times these weeks before Christmas is a time when those of us who carry grief or pain, or suffering feel silenced, unseen, or worse, shamed for not being in the holly jolly spirit. Our call to keep awake is to turn toward suffering and grief this year - individually and communally. We are called to acknowledge and lift up the sorrow and struggles that dwell within

and among us. Keep awake to the realities that so many of us are living with - the almost 8,000 people who died from COVID, the jobs that were lost and the dreams that were destroyed as the world shut down, the children who have had their notions of safety and comfort stolen from them at too young of an age.

This year, because every one of us is carrying more grief and anxiety, it feels like it is easier to talk about. It feels like we are being more honest with each other. Meghan Markle wrote an op ed in the New York Times this week about her miscarriage and the power of asking someone, “Are you okay?” And waiting for an authentic response. It feels like we are practicing that more, and more confident in saying, “Actually, no, I’m not okay.”

As we move away from this year and into a new reality, I hope we take that with us. I hope that we dream of a world where we can hold the tensions, and move toward healing for all people. Where no one feels left behind or silenced or shamed. A world where this time next year we can make space for joy and pain, sorrow and hope, love and loss, knowing that God is present in each of these, calling on us to be agents of healing and comfort in the world.

While we keep awake wait for what comes next, we dream. The stories we will hear this month, the very Christmas story itself, are about dreams and longing and visions of what comes next. This was necessary because there was no blueprint for what was about to happen, not for Mary, not for Joseph, not for anyone. They needed to be able to dream and create a vision for what could be in order to continue forward in faithfulness. They needed to be clear that God was guiding their dreams in order to trust where they were going. We need to be clear that God is guiding our dreams so we can trust where we are going, trust that we are building something new, something good, something grounded in hope for the inclusion and care of all people and all of creation.

I still miss worshipping in person so much that my heart aches and longs for our gathered community whenever I walk inside the sanctuary. But I hope that we won't return to the way things were. I hope that when we are back together, something new will have grown, we will be living out the dream of who this community is and who God is calling us to be in the future, focused on the vision before us and ready to enact in the world. May it be so.