

D.J. Reed
November 27, 2011

1st Sunday of Advent
Sermon Series: "Expecting"
"Alive, Alert, Awake, Enthusiastic"
Mark 13:32-37

Chilson Hills Church
Howell, MI

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=189491508>

Every year, about this time, preachers do their best to make Advent sound more appealing than it really is.

We try to make it sound exciting and appealing, and we work hard to remind parishioners against the rampant consumerism and materialism that characterizes the Christmas holidays.

We say that we should be anticipating the birth of our Savior, the coming of the hope of the world.

We do our best to say with every ounce of sincerity that our hearts should really be set on the "Christ" in "Christmas" and not on the "Ho-Ho-Ho" of Santa Claus.

And every year, we win some battles but its arguable whether or not we win the war.

We try to dress it up with splashy productions, well-produced worship services and music that will blow you away, but really, if we're honest, it's hard to compete against Frosty The Snowman, Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer, Walking in A Winter Wonderland.

There are many reasons this is the case, but I think the main reason is that the message of Advent is so completely different from the market-driven holiday season.

Advent is all about waiting and believing in something you can't see yet. Christmas has become all about seeing and believing you can have it.

Advent is about expecting a day or an hour that is unknown and uncertain. Christmas is about waiting for December 25 or 24th or whatever day you open the presents.

Waiting versus seeing, expecting versus getting, mystery versus timetable. If we are

given the option of getting or waiting, preparing or enjoying – well I think you'd agree, it's hard to wait.

In 1972, Stanford psychologist, Walter Mischel conducted an experiment on children of various ages that might be considered cruel and unusual punishment.

(show marshmallows) He placed a marshmallow in front of a child and told them that they could eat one now or wait for two later. But they couldn't eat the one now, they had to wait.

And then Mischel left the room and something like this took place.

(show 3 minute video regarding the marshmallow test)

This was a study on what is known in the world of psychology as "deferred gratification." You can enjoy it now or enjoy it later; and Mischel wanted to see how long the children could last.

Now, I won't tell you exactly what these results demonstrated, but let's just say that the ones who waited demonstrated the kind of self-control that would eventually develop into positive traits later on. But the ones who scarfed down the marshmallow... well, they didn't do so well (Don't try this on your kids at home).

The point: waiting isn't fun, but waiting is worth it.

The Bible is written by people who must feel like they are caught in a study of "deferred gratification."

In the Old Testament the Israelites were told to wait for their freedom from Israel, wait for The Promised Land, and wait for deliverance from their enemies. Their leaders told them to wait,

their prophets told them to wait, and their priests told them to wait.

And in the mean time they were to avoid the immediate gratification of idols they could see and touch waiting for a God they could not see or feel. I'm sure they felt like they were staring at marshmallows.

And in the New Testament the message of waiting doesn't relent. Wait for the kingdom, wait for Christ's coming, wait for the return of the Lord. And the readers are promised, if you wait, you will enjoy a life that is twice as good, infinitely better than anything you could crave here in earth. But you've got to wait; you've got to wait for that mysterious day or hour that remains a mystery.

You heard it in the passage we read from the Gospel of Mark earlier: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Who has a watch on? Tell me what time it is.

(Get several responses)

Who is right? Who has the correct time?

(Get several responses)

The "official" time is determined by Greenwich Mean Time, or solar time, or Coordinated Universal Time. This Greenwich Mean Time, which crosses right through the heart of England, is "zero o'clock" for the world. How was this line determined to be "zero o'clock" the starting line for all clocks?

Because hundreds of years ago, the Brits had the best chronometers in the world, the best time telling instruments, and they also had the best Navy. Therefore, they controlled the seas and the traffic on the seas which controlled commerce and business, military and travel. Therefore, they controlled time.

And if you were living in the middle of Kansas in the mid-1800's there was no way you could know the "official" time either. That is, until the

railroad starting spreading West. Trains had to be on time and stay on schedule when transporting people or freight and so, townspeople, business owners and saloon managers started setting their pocket watches and clocks according to the train schedule.

Who determines the day or the hour? In our society, it appears the ships and trains and other means of transportation have controlled time.

But in Scripture no one knows the day or the hour; not trains, ships, angels or even the Son. Only one person knows the time, and that's The Father.

The day or the hour that he's talking about is what is sometimes referred to as The Judgment Day or the day of Christ's return. On that day, Jesus will assume his rightful place as the leader and judge of this world and God's heavenly kingdom will transform the earth.

What will that look like? Well, he doesn't really say. He instead tells us to watch for signs, dark and scary signs.

He talks about terrible times of persecutions, false prophets who make bad predictions, natural catastrophes, family feuds and wars pitting nation against nations.

These will all be tips that his return is near and that Christ will be coming back any day now. They will clue you in on his arrival like a flowering tree in the spring.

And so, humanity has been watching those signs ever since, and even though Jesus told us that no one will know the day or the hour, we just can't help but trying to hazard a guess.

2012

May 21, 2011

September 11, 2011

January 1, 2000

1984

These are among the many dates that have been proposed for Christ's coming. And none of them (at least that I know of) have been correct.

And so, we keep waiting like Linus waiting in the pumpkin patch for The Great Pumpkin:

The Great Pumpkin will appear and I'll be waiting for him! I'll be there! I'll be sitting there in that pumpkin patch... and I'll see the Great Pumpkin. Just wait and see, Charlie Brown. I'll see that Great Pumpkin. I'll SEE the Great Pumpkin! Just you wait, Charlie Brown. The Great Pumpkin will appear and I'll be waiting for him...

Waiting. We look so silly doing it, when we could be doing so many other fun things. I mean really, look at you. You're sitting here on a Sunday morning...waiting. You could be doing other things! Do you really believe all this stuff!

What if Jesus never comes? What if you get to the end of it all, will all the waiting be meaningless? What if you hold off on the immediate gratification because you believe your desires will eventually be satisfied when Christ comes and nothing happens? Is it all a waste?

Well, that first question, the one about whether or not Jesus is coming back is something I can't force you to believe. It's really a matter of faith and belief.

The Bible says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen." That means Christ's return isn't going to be proven to you until it's too late. You have to believe it.

But looking back at that video footage of the kids trying to resist the marshmallows (aside from marshmallows being a kid favorite) you can see why they had such a difficult time demonstrating self-control: they sat in a chair with nothing else in the room but a "Sta-Puff"

delight staring them in the face. There was nothing else to do. But, what the researchers found was that the kids who were most successful found something else to do besides looking at the marshmallow.

"Beware, keep alert," the text says and it also says that it's like being a group of employees with responsibilities and work to be done. We are watchmen, keeping guard over the townspeople. We have work to do and stuff to be done – that is how we wait.

What does that work look like? Well, it's not sitting around. It's not consuming and buying, taking and keeping. We are to be at work caring for "the least of these," the poor, the hungry, the sick, stranger and the prisoner. We are to be at work encouraging each other and supporting each other. We are to be at work giving.

We all have a job to do. There is so much to be done. And let me tell you, sitting here in church isn't the kind of work Jesus had in mind. God wants us to get back to work. Not the kind of work we do for pay. No, the work Jesus refers to is doing good things for others, serving and helping.

Jesus calls this kind of living "awakened" living; the kind of living that anticipates an arrival, that prepares us for what is sure to come. "Keep awake," Jesus would say. Behave like I'm coming home any minute, act like I am just around the corner, in the driveway, on the front doorstep... opening the door. Be ready for me.

Mike Hargrove stepped to the plate in the eighth inning during the 1973 Western Carolina League Class A All-Star game. It was a critical at-bat and it was crucial for him to reach base. But just as the pitcher went into the wind-up, he noticed the tape job covering his hand wiggling free, and promptly popped out to the center fielder.

"From that point on, I told myself I would never step to the plate until I was ready," Hargrove said later.

So, he began a ritual before every big-league pitch he faced:

Screw a pad tight on his left thumb (later in his career he replaced the pad with a glove);

Tug on his jersey at shoulder level;

Tug at his sleeves;

Tug at his pants;

Adjust his batting helmet;

Plant his left foot in the batter's box;

Gently place his right foot in the box.

Before every pitch.

It's what earned him the nickname, "Human Rain Delay."

But while his routine irritated fans and pitchers alike, the ritual truly helped him get ready physically for every pitch. Hargrove said that he used that time to think about what pitch the pitcher had thrown and what the count was. He was preparing himself not only physically and mentally, but emotionally as well.

This stuff we do as Christians, this serving, singing, reading the Bible, praying... and waiting, may seem strange and even annoying because it's so contrary to the message of the holiday season. But really it's helping us prepare for something that is more important, someone who is certain to come (if you believe).

And this waiting we do during Advent is hardly a lazy kind of waiting. It's an active preparation, a readying for something great and grand. It's preparing for the next coming when Christ will come and find us sleeping or awake.

So, during this season of Advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas; how are you preparing for Christ's coming?

Ask yourselves three "W" questions.

What is your work? Are you doing anything to serve the poor? Are your activities self-centered or others centered? Do you look for ways to help others?

What are you watching? The economy? Sports? Your family? Your job? Your competition? Your friends? Your schoolwork? Video games? What is drawing your attention? What are you focused on?

The answer to those questions, will help you answer this next question:

Do you need to wake up? Do you need to go through a major life-change? Do you need to stop doing something and start doing something else? Do you need to simply start? Do you simply need to stop?

Advent is the time to take those questions seriously. It's a time to wake-up, watch, and work. This is what an awakened, alert and lively Christian looks like.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

For Sunday, November 27, 2011's Sermon

Foundational Scripture: Mark 13:32-37

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=189491557>

Featured Scripture Reflection: "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." – **Mark 13:33** <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=189491608>

Opening Questions: In what ways do you prepare for the "big surprises in life"? Do you believe Christ will come again? What do you think that will look like? How do you prepare for that moment?

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read **Mark 13:21-31**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=189491641> What stands out to you about this passage? What questions do you have? What do you like about this passage? What don't you like about this passage?
- Read **Mark 13:32-37**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=189491557> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage compliment the previous passage?
- Read **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=189491669> Think about what you've just read. How does it relate to the previous passages?

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do they encourage me to live my life differently?

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, we anticipate your coming. We expect you to return. Help us to live our lives as expectant people, living a life of love, joy and compassion. Amen.