

Mark 13: 24-37  
Creekside COB  
November 27, 2005  
*First Sunday in Advent*

***The God We Are Waiting For***  
"The Great Awakening God"

*(Before the sermon begins, a trumpet blasts Reveille.)*

Is everyone awake? Judging from your startled expressions, I would say you have been called to attention. Reveille is the name of the familiar trumpet refrain you just heard. The word, reveille means, *"to wake up; to stay awake; to keep vigilant."*

Given the choice, I would rather not wake to a trumpet. I don't like being woken by loud sounds. I never set the alarm on, "buzzer." I prefer waking to musical accompaniment. In college I woke to rock music. Now that aging has set in, I prefer regaining consciousness to softer, more serene music. There are people for whom it doesn't matter because they spring out of bed the moment the wake-up. They can't wait to smell the coffee and start their day. I am *not* one of them. I don't wake easily. I start the day slow.

It is Advent once again-- the time set-aside by the church for waking, watching, and waiting. *Expectancy* is the watchword during the days leading up to Christmas. Over the next four Sundays we will focus on the One we are waiting for, and listen to what Advent tells us about the God who drew close to us in Bethlehem. The theme of this series is: "The God We Are Waiting For." We will reflect upon four dimensions of God's being revealed in Jesus' birth. Next Sunday it will be, *"The Word in the Wilderness God,"* followed by, *"The Light in the Darkness God,"* and *"The Miniature, Majestic God."*

Today we begin with, *"The Great Awakening God."* You might think the text Sabrina read is out of place. Jesus uses

disturbing, apocalyptic imagery to describe what can't be described when the curtain closes on history. His return will be preceded with upheaval on earth and in the heavens. The sun will grow dim. The moon will refuse to shine. Stars will fall like rain. There will be no point in hiding in a cave or under your bed. Everyone and everything will be affected. Nothing will be the same.

Jesus said these things on his way to the cross, but the church reads them at the start of Advent to underscore the necessity of awareness and preparation for the changes in store for the world. Three times in the last five verses Jesus says, "Keep awake!"

I spoke with a man who has lived a long life, and has a secret few people know. He can hardly read. School had a terrible time in school because he couldn't stay awake. He tried paying attention, but it didn't take long until he nodded off. As he spoke he began to cry, reciting the painful memories of being singled out, made fun of by his peers, and punished by his teachers. As an adult he was passed over for promotions and prevented from doing work he wanted because he couldn't stay awake. These were the days before anyone knew about narcolepsy. Decades later, he still the regrets what could have been and never will be.

Last Sunday evening after the Thanksgiving Service at Elkhart Valley, I sat across the table from a young man eager for conversation. I had just taken a bite of Dutch apple pie ala' mode when he started talking about what was wrong with the church. This was *very* good pie, the kind you want to savor but can't if you are talking. I didn't want to be rude and say, "Could you hold that thought until I'm done eating." Knowing I was going to get an earful whether I asked or not, I let him go on. First it was the problem with his church, then the denomination, and then churches in general.

"Christians don't know what's happening." "What is happening?" I asked. "Nine-Eleven. Terrorism. The record number of hurricanes and earthquakes in the past year—these are the things Jesus said would happen before he returned. It's

getting and people need to be warned. They don't realize he's coming back soon!" As I ate my last bite of ice cream and crumb topping I said, "Well, it would do some good to remember what Jesus said about it. *"Think twice when people say, 'It will be any time now. Look! Over there! I can see him from here!'"* And how can we know what Jesus said he didn't know?"

What pose does Advent suggest we should assume? On one hand we don't want to be afflicted with spiritual narcolepsy and sleep through a revolution. On the other hand, we don't have access to privileged information about when God will set things right, nor should we fearfully focus on the wrong that is so strong because Jesus is the ruler yet.

Advent isn't a pre-celebration of what once was, but anticipation of what will be. If you haven't done it already, you will pull a box from the closet with tissue-wrapped nativity figures. You will put the shepherds, wise men, the animals, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in their assigned places on the coffee table. It is a sign that at a specific time, in a specific place, God intruded upon human history in the life of Jesus.

Christmas is no big deal if it is just an anniversary of Jesus' birth. His birth was just the beginning. He lived a holy life. He made the power and presence of God real. No one could contain nor curtail him. "Follow me," he said, and people did, to goodness knows where. But we got fed up with him blowing holes in our little systems, so we killed him. He didn't stay dead long, though. He rose because God loved us. He made it clear he wasn't finished with the world or with us.

Advent is about Jesus' first *and* second coming. If it is just a remembrance of his birth, then it can't generate any more wonder than the birth of Washington or Lincoln. Neither George nor Abe said they were coming back. But the return of Jesus is one of the most basic formulations of the Christian faith. It's mentioned in the major creeds of the church. When communion is celebrated, people often say, *"Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again."* The closing words of the book of Revelation are, *"Come, Lord Jesus."*

**First, Advent tells us to stay awake and keep watch for the One who has come and is coming. Second, Advent tells us to slow down while the world works itself into frenzy with planning, purchasing, preparing, and partying.**

**Were any of you in line when Wal-Mart opened on Friday at 5:00 a.m.? Are you shopping early to buy the year's hot items while supplies last? Have you decorated your house with a string of lights that stretches from here to Indianapolis? Is your front yard adorned with Santa, the sleigh, and "white light" reindeer with heads that bob up and down? Do you have the inflatable snowmen and polar bear, the flashing candy canes, angels, and a quartet of Old English carolers surrounding an illumined Nativity?**

**Out of this mass hysteria we come together to worship and remember that we are those who answered his call, "Follow me." We plod along like a herd of stampeding turtles, repeating to ourselves, "Slow down. Take a deep breath, and take refuge in Advent and the little bright pockets of hope that are all the world has.**

**We're seeing signs that the marketers and merchandisers are running out of new angles for promoting Christmas. I see a table-full of advertising executives scratching their heads, struggling to come up with a new idea. One guy jumps up and says, "I've got it! Let make upside-down Christmas trees and sell them for twice the costs of regular trees."**

**Don't get me wrong. I love Christmas as much as you. I like the schmaltzy music that is part of it. I love the voice of the late Burl Ives, but there is no way that singing, "*Oh by golly have a holy, jolly Christmas this year,*" will turn the tide.**

**We aren't just looking back at a moment in history. We anticipate an unfolding, evolving event over the horizon. Advent calls us to pull back and reconnect with the source of all our joy and hope.**

**Finally, Advent says that what nine out of ten average Americans believe is not necessarily the whole truth. During this season we intentionally distance ourselves from the tyranny of the majority that says, "This is as good as it gets." It wakes us to the fact that there is more to life than we realize.**

**Have you ever wondered what it is like to wake from a coma? Eric Johansen suffered a severe head injury in an auto accident. He was comatose for three months. When he woke, he literally had to relearn everything. Taped above his bed in the critical care unit was a sign that said, "Your name is Eric." He was a genius before the accident. Afterward he struggled to be average. But what he has achieved since then is extraordinary.**

**Julie was sixteen. She belonged to the Mexico Church of the Brethren. She suffered a massive head trauma from which the doctors were doubtful she could recover. She spent six months at the St. Joe Med Center where I made regular visits to Julie and her family. Like Eric, she also had to start over after she woke. Julie went on to earn an advanced degree in physical therapy. At Christmas she sends me a card. In it she writes, "*I'm still alive!*"**

**Then there was a woman named Karen. I think you know her story. Each of them was given a new outlook on life. They now know the difference between problems and inconveniences. They have no time for things that don't matter, and time to dedicate to things that do.**

**Henri Nouwen told a wonderful story about a conversation between twins in the womb. The sister said to her brother, "*I believe there is life after birth.*" He brother protested. "No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark, cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but cling to the cord that feeds us." His sister replied, "There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move." She could not convince him.**

**She went on, "I have something else to say, and I'm afraid you won't believe that, either, but I think there is a Mother." "A**

**Mother?! What are you talking about? I've never seen s mother. Neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? This is all we have. Why do you want more? This isn't such a bad place. *We have all we need, so let's just be content.***

**After a long silence, his sister said, "*Don't you feel those squeezes every once in a while? They're unpleasant and painful.*" "So.... What's so special about that? He asked. "I think these squeezes are getting us ready for another place, one much more beautiful than this where we will see our mother face to face. Don't you think that is exciting?"**

**During Advent, we allow God to put the squeeze on us. We don't have to be in a coma to have a great awakening. Many of us can attest to this fact. We were sailing through life without a thought that there could be more to it. We thought and acted much like everyone else. We conformed. We didn't get worked up about things. We were lulled into a sleepy sameness... until someone came along and changed all that.**

**For me, it was a professor who shook me every which way but lose. He didn't get my attention. He woke me up to a world I had been missing.**

**Who woke you up, shook you up, and put the squeeze on you? Our literary friend, Bill Shakespeare wrote: "For some must watch, while some must sleep; thus runs the world away."  
Which are you?**