

Sermon – November 29, 2020  
“Keep Awake”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Mark 13:24-37

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning! Welcome to everyone on the live stream. Please let us know you have joined us on our online worship by taking a minute to place a greeting in the comment line. I hope that everyone was able to find time on Thanksgiving Day to give thanks to God for the blessings we have received throughout this past year. Even in the midst of a pandemic and the turmoil of these days, God is at work to bring good out of all of our circumstances. Let's take a few minutes to praise God this morning and to celebrate events in the life of our church. I would like to start by celebrating God's provisions for needs in our community that we were able to meet this past week. Some of the prayers we have been holding before God for needs in our community have been answered through the compassion of God's people. I would also like to celebrate the Thanksgiving celebrations that, while different, did occur in the midst of a pandemic. I know that our family's efforts to take time to give thanks for God's blessings was a time filled with blessing beyond the bounty of the food we feasted upon. I also give thanks this day that many people in our country stopped and took time to gather and give thanks to God for the blessings they have received. For those who connected with the Afton Bible study this past week, we were blessed to be witnesses to Jesus' first sign in the Gospel of John, the changing of water into an abundance of wine at a wedding feast. If you would like to join one of the Charge's Bible studies or a Sunday school class, please seek them out and join. There is always room for another person to join a group studying God's word.

Let me provide a little background as we step into the season of Advent. This is Hope Sunday, as we learned during the lighting of the Advent wreath. This is the time when Christmas decorations begin to appear, and it is the season when we begin to anticipate the coming of the Christ Child and the hope that comes with his arrival. This morning we find ourselves on the Mount

of Olives with Jesus and his disciples. Earlier in the day, Jesus told his disciples that the temple will be destroyed and that every stone will be thrown down. Here on the Mount of Olives, Jesus has paused to answer the disciples' question as to when this will happen. Let me caution us that there are two teachings that are intermingled in Jesus' prophetic words. One applies to the near-term destruction of the temple and its replacement with Jesus as the everlasting temple, and the other is focused on the return of Christ at the end of time, the time of the final judgment. We will need to separate these two teachings as we look at Jesus' words. As we seek to separate these prophetic words, we will want to key in on the phrases, "all of these things" and "in those days" and their variants. This will help us separate Jesus' words for two very different times of prophecy.

With that background in place, let's look at God's word for us today. One of the first things we encounter is the description of the darkening of the sun and the moon. When I read these words, my thoughts move very quickly into the science part of my brain, and I start to wonder how such things can happen. I ask myself, "How could the sun go out or change, yet life on earth continue because of the fragile balance of the heat from the sun and life on earth?" And then when I read about stars falling from heaven, I really begin to struggle with what I am reading. I get caught trying to understand how a star can fall from heaven and how that would have to have happened millions of years beforehand for the light from a distant star to appear to move or change in the night sky. Let me encourage all of us to read these items not as literal events but as Jesus telling us that creation will respond to the happenings that occur, "in those days." Remember that this is a marker phrase for the end of time, so what Jesus is describing in this statement is a reference to the response of creation at the end of time. This is not stars falling to earth, but the response of the same creation that sang praises at the creation of the universe responding to the arrival of Jesus in power at the end of time.

In those days—remember this marker is for the end of time—the Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory! This is not an isolated event that is seen in one place in the world, but something that will occur in a manner that all will be able to witness. When this occurs, the angels who serve Jesus under his authority as the one who has all authority in heaven and earth, will be sent forth and gather the believers from all points on the earth and across the heavens. This statement helps us to understand that all of those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and savior will be gathered into the coming kingdom of Jesus. They will come from all points in the earth and from across the heavens.

For those who mark their Bibles, I would encourage you to put a marker after this verse and to note that the marker words now change to “these things.” We have moved from a marker of “those days” that relates to the end of time to “these things” that speak to the things Jesus shared that would mark the destruction of the temple. Jesus is now addressing a different moment, a different prophetic statement. He begins with the parable about the fig tree that puts forth new growth as the summer comes. Remember that Jesus is on the Mount of Olives, a place known for its large fig trees. It is also late spring, the time when the fig trees are starting to put out new growth. Jesus then tells the disciples to learn this lesson from the fig tree. As the coming of summer is marked by the fig trees’ new growth, so also will the destruction of the temple be marked by the things Jesus has shared. The disciples know that when they see the new growth showing on the fig trees, summer is close in time. Through this parable, Jesus is giving them an answer to their question about the destruction of the temple. His words are that this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place. A generation is about forty years and the date when Jesus gives this prophecy is somewhere around 30 AD, so we would expect the destruction of the temple to occur before the end of forty years or around 70 AD.

Let me share a little history of Israel. In 66 AD, the Jews, led by the Zealots, revolted against the Romans and forced them out of Israel. It took Emperor Nero two years under the army led by Vespasian to restore order to the northern provinces of Israel, and in 68 AD the general turned his forces to the subjugation of Jerusalem. Emperor Nero committed suicide in this year, and the general Vespasian was declared the new emperor. His son, Titus, a name you will want to remember for your Roman history exam, took over the conquest of Jerusalem. Under Titus’ direction, the Roman legions surrounded the city and began their siege. Each day during the four months of siege, the Romans crucified 500 of the Jewish prisoners they held. There were so many crucifixions that there was no more lumber to be used for the crosses. In 70 AD, the Romans breached the outer walls and began to ransack the city. Their siege culminated with the burning and destruction of the temple. The hidden stores of gold in the temple melted in the fire and ran between the stones. The soldiers realized this and pried up and threw down the stones of the temple to get to the gold. The Romans slaughtered thousands of Jews. The first century historian Josephus tells us in his history of the battle there were some 60,000 Jews crucified on the roads that led into the city. Thousands of Jews were enslaved and sent to the Roman mines in Egypt; others were taken to Rome to die in the colosseums for the amusement of the public. The rebels held on for another three years in parts of Israel until they were finally eliminated at Masada in 73 AD. The

Christian Jews avoided this fate by taking Jesus' words of warning seriously and fleeing Jerusalem when the desolating sacrilege was offered on the altar by the Romans. The generation that Jesus spoke these words to on the Mount of Olives had not passed away before these things had taken place. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was destroyed, and Rome resettled a people from an area of Turkey in Jerusalem to complete their conquest of Israel, giving them land to help the Romans keep control.

Notice in the next verse that Jesus tells us "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Jesus' words, like those of God in the Old Testament, are true words that will last. What Jesus tells us will occur, the promises he makes come to pass, and the steadfast love he holds for us will forever change the lives of the people who hear his words and keep them.

In verse 32, the marker words change from "these things" to "that day." With that change, Jesus has shifted his prophetic teaching on the Mount of Olives from a near-time event to another event, one marked by creation's response to the coming of the Son of Man in clouds with great power and glory. Jesus tells us that he does not know when "that day" will come. He offers no sign for us to look for that will mark its arrival. This does not mean that Jesus is not a coequal member of the Holy Trinity. It means that the Father is the one who recognizes the moment in time to send the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. This does not place a hierarchy on the Trinity, but makes the point that this moment in time has no precursor to mark its coming. Its approach is impossible to identify beforehand in order that we may then prepare ourselves for its arrival. There is no marker given to us that we can look for in order to realize it has not yet occurred and to subsequently ignore our duties given in Jesus' words. Likewise, there is no marker to look for that would cause us to realize we need to stop our sinful living and to prepare our lives for the coming of the king. Unlike the destruction of the temple, an action for which Jesus tells his disciples what event to look for and what to do to avoid being caught in the ensuing wrath, the day of judgment, "that day", will arrive suddenly and without any warning. Jesus gives us a different approach to prepare for this certain event. Here, Jesus tells another short parable about a man who goes on a journey and puts his slaves in charge, each at their own work. Jesus tells us that the man puts the doorkeeper on alert telling him to be diligent in his work of watching for the owner's return. He then tells us that the doorkeeper does not know the hour of the master's coming. It could be at any time of day, and so the doorkeeper, and all of the slaves, are to be alert and watching for the return of the master. They are not to think the master has been delayed and become negligent in their work, but are to be at

work, diligently carrying out their duties and watching for the return of their master as they work. Jesus' ending direction to his disciples is to "Keep awake."

Now there are many lessons for us in this short discourse that Mark includes in his Gospel. This morning, let us focus briefly on the question, "Are we awake?" Now, being awake is not us staying awake and never giving our bodies rest. Nor does Jesus tell us to work at our tasks until we fall exhausted and cannot continue. Jesus tells us that the final judgment, his return in glory and power, comes at an unexpected time, and, unlike the destruction of the temple where those who saw the sign were to flee, here we are to be prepared. We are to be those who are awake. This is not a sprint to a finish but a long journey that we must work at continuously and diligently. In this parable, we are the slaves who each are given their unique work. We are to be found at that work until the master returns. We are not to look at the world around us that is always ripe with afflictions, wars, rumors of wars, and natural disasters, and take those signs as speaking to the final return of Christ. We are not to spend time seeking to calculate the end of time from what we read or discover in God's word or other sources. We are to be those who are at work, carrying out our assignments in the kingdom of God. In our lifetimes, we have witnessed those who have declared they know the date of the end of time, and often these leaders have caused those who follow them great pain and suffering. That is not our response to what happens around us. We are to be those who are at work in the kingdom of God as the world staggers forward. We are to be those who are always seeking to join Jesus in his mission to the people around us no matter the hour or day. We are to be those who have received their assignment from God and work at it every day until we accomplish our task, are relieved of our work, and are given new tasks or witness the return of our Lord and Savior in glory and power. Don't be distracted by what happens in the world, but be found at work for the kingdom. Many of us have come to the point in our lives where we are able to rest from our vocations. Our work in God's kingdom has no such concept. Our goal is to finish strong. We are given the Sabbath day to rest in the Lord that we may be ready to work six days at our work. Here in Mark's Gospel, there are no descriptions of the types of work that people are to be doing. That is because Jesus has already outlined that work in his teaching. Those welcomed into the kingdom of God are those who have been at work as we find work defined in Matthew 25. Remember these words, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Remember also the great commission that we are to be part of found in Matthew 28, "Go therefore and make disciples of all

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Our work that we are to be focused upon may change over the course of our lifetime, and we need to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into the work that Jesus wants us to be about until he returns.

We cannot find this work and be about God’s will if we don’t know the word of God. One aspect of seeking to be prepared for the return of Jesus is to be found studying the words that will not pass away that we may learn and grow in Christ. We also need to be those who are not looking outside to the world for our work, but to be those who are looking inward through prayer and surrender of self to Jesus to identify the gap between the reality of the difference between the work we are doing and the master’s work for us. We are to seek to understand this gap and to discover how to close it by seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer and gathering with others who are also seeking this knowledge. Finally, the largest challenge to keeping awake, to being prepared for Jesus’ final return, is an attitude that we are awake. We may be self-assured that we are awake and working for God’s kingdom when we are actually asleep. We can easily begin to convince ourselves that Jesus has not returned in over 2000 years, so why do we need to be concerned now about the master’s work and being prepared for a return that has long been delayed and has no indication it will soon occur? Let me remind us that we are closer today than we were yesterday to the return of Jesus in glory and power. The time until that event grows smaller with each hour. We are only given a few days to be about the work of the master in our fleeting lifetimes. We need to diligently seek the Lord’s guidance, seek to see the least of these around us, then go to them and join with them as we boldly follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ until his return. What is the work that the master has called us to today that we will awake to and diligently perform that we may be found at work in the kingdom of God? This is where we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us into the unique work the Master has for us each day.

*Pray with me: Father, help me to set aside the distractions of the world and instead be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit into the work you are asking me to do in the kingdom of God. Guide me, Lord, into times of study of your word, times of prayer, and a fresh surrender to the will of the Master. Lord, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to act for you right here, right now. Amen.*