

“Awaken to Advent - It’s Darkest Before the Dawn”

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

Graphics: bedroom, large alarm clock, time, darkness, clouds, light only on clock

Big Truth: Advent is a coming, and appearing. For Christians, this is the season during which we prepare our hearts to once again celebrate the incarnation of Jesus on earth. In many ways, we’ve felt like we’ve been sleeping - not knowing how to be awake right now - amidst all the political, social, medical, and financial struggles. Yet, while the world is in darkness, God IS light. Advent gives the people of the Panama UMC the opportunity to awaken to the advent of Jesus and prepare for His second coming.

Focus Phrase: In the darkness, God is preparing to shine His light of HOPE in our world.

1. Introduction

- A. Well, I’m not sure exactly how we got here, but here we are - it’s Advent...the season that prepares us, leads us, and invites us to Christmas...to the celebration of the birth of Jesus.
- B. In October, I read an article that said, “Christmas may need to be cut back, curtailed, or even cancelled this year due to supply chain issues, lack of workers, and travel restrictions.”
- C. Church, if Christmas is about supply chains and workers, then, “...we’re to be pitied among all people.” (to paraphrase the Apostle Paul).
- D. There’s NOTHING (let me say that again) THERE IS NOTHING that can stop the Church from celebrating the birth of Jesus! The world may be in pieces and not firing on all cylinders, but the Word of God will not pass away! There may be darkness, but the LIGHT is getting ready to shine in our world and in our hearts once again as we get ready for Christmas!
- E. It’s time for the Church to **Awaken to Advent**.
- F. Throughout the next 5 weeks, we’ll be here every Sunday morning, and for some special worship experiences, so that we don’t fall asleep...so that we keep awake, as we’ll hear in today’s scripture from Mark 13.
- G. For Christians, Christmas is a HOLY day...this season is a HOLY season. It’s set apart for GOD’S purposes, not ours...and not the world’s.
- H. So let’s PRAY and then we can get oriented to our call to awakening.
- I. **PRAY!**
- J. Now, you may be wondering why we’ve set up a bedroom scene here in the sanctuary. Good question! It’s a little unorthodox, for sure.
- K. The title of our Advent worship theme is **Awaken to Advent**. The focal point of this scene is not the bed or the table or the walls, but the **ALARM CLOCK**.

- L. I don't know about you, but I suspect that most of us awaken to an alarm clock each morning...or at least have SOME trigger that gets you out of bed. If you're over 50, if it's not an alarm clock, I'm pretty sure I know what that trigger is! If you're a young person, maybe it's your phone alarm, a text message from a friend, or a parent that rudely awakes you.
- M. The point is, we can't sleep forever. There's cleanup to do, there are prayers to be lifted up, scripture to read, work to be done, life to be lived! If you're asleep, you can't fully love God or love others.
- N. This Advent series - Awaken to Advent - is our wake-up call! It's our alarm! Wake up! Get up! Clean up! Pray up! Eat up! And get out there! There's a world out there that thinks that Christmas is about supply chains. We have the HOPE of the world. His name is Jesus. And he's coming back, even as we celebrate his first coming!
- O. Today, we'll begin in the quiet, dark moments of our day. I like to call it the slumber before the alarm. I don't always wake before the alarm, but when I do...those moments are some of my favorite, if I'm well-rested. You awaken, it's still very dark, the house is quiet, nothing is stirring.
- P. On my worst days, in that liminal time before the alarm, the anxiety of the day floods in like a tidal wave. On my best days, though, as the darkness floods the room, the thoughts of my mind immediately turn to God's presence. And it's in THOSE moments that my heart is open to the Holy Spirit. In the darkness, God is preparing me for the day. What's that like for you?
- Q. One thing I know as a hunter, walking into the woods before twilight, is that it's darkest just before the dawn. Whether I'm walking in a field or slumbering in bed...it's darkest before the dawn, which the title of this first message.
- R. Jesus came once. Jesus is coming back. Jesus is the Dawn the Jewish people waited for. Jesus is the Dawn we await now!
- S. We wait for Christmas, to celebrate his first coming. We wait for his second coming. The second Dawn. Yet, what does it mean to say that it's darkest before the dawn? Let's find out...
- T. Write this down in your notes: **In the darkness, God is preparing to shine His light of HOPE in our world.**
- U. Let's open our bibles to Mark 13, starting in verse 24. Two weeks ago, we left off in Mark 13:13 when Jesus said, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." Today, we go to verse 24, and Jesus is still teaching his disciples...

2. Scripture

A. READ Mark 13:24-27

- i. This short section is Jesus' grand summary of what's to come when He returns.

- a. There will be signs that will be unmistakable - darkened sun and moon, stars falling.
 - b. The powers of heaven (I'm not even sure what those are) will be shaken, meaning there will be a shockwave that blasts through heaven and earth!
 - c. Jesus will appear in the clouds with great power and glory!
 - d. And the angels will gather the believers so that we can usher Jesus to the new Kingdom on earth...and heaven and earth will be connected in a brand new way!
- ii. That's what's coming. Yet, it's darkest before the dawn.
 - iii. Jesus said, "in those days" at the beginning of this quote. What days?
 - a. Well, if you go back to verses 20 and 21, you read that in "those days" God is getting ready to do a new thing...He's awakening the believers to GET UP and GET READY!
 - b. In "those days" false prophets will appear. In "those days" there will be false signs and false starts that lead people astray.
 - c. But then in verse 23, Jesus went on to say, "But be alert; I have already told you everything." No need for ANY prophet but Jesus and His word written in scripture. No need for any truth but His truth as told to us by the Holy Spirit.
 - d. But "in those days," we'll see the signs and know it's time.
 - e. And, right before dawn, it gets dark...no sun...no moon...no stars.
 - f. There've been times when I've been outside at night with no moon, no sun, and no stars. The woods at Camp Findley is one, where there is no external light on those dark nights. And it's DARK DARK.
 - iv. Yet, it won't stay dark forever...it's a sign of things - the dawn - coming...
 - v. Look at verse 28...

B. READ Mark 13:28-31

- i. You've, no doubt, heard the phrase, "If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck, it's probably a (what?)...a duck!"
- ii. Jesus is not some slight-of-hand, hidden mystery kind of guy. When he healed, he healed publicly. When he taught, he taught many publicly.
- iii. And when He comes back, it won't be some secret hidden event that only believers who have reached a certain level of spirituality will see. In fact, not only will believers see it, but the whole world will see it!
- iv. It will be as plain as a fig tree that's leafing out...and you know that soon the fruit will grow. It's like when the corn grows and when it tassels out,

you know it's "delicious season." It's like when an apple tree begins to bud and grow the fruit of fall! It's plain and obvious.

- v. When the Son of Man comes, WE WILL KNOW.
- vi. When Jesus said "this generation" will not pass away, he was referring to this season between His first coming and second coming. WE are that generation. We will not be destroyed or defeated...we will "endure to the end and be saved..." he said in verse 13.
- vii. And Jesus will make all things new...heaven and earth will pass away, but... "My words will not pass away," he said.
- viii. When it gets darkest...that's when Jesus will return and He and His words will be the only light we see.
- ix. It's coming...we see the signs. We just don't know when...verse 32...

C. READ Mark 13:32-37

- i. Keep awake!
- ii. Jesus clearly told the disciples and us that we CAN NOT, WILL NOT, SHOULD NOT know when He will return.
- iii. The Jewish people in the first century BC had not clue WHEN Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. All they knew was that for 500 years, they waited. They hoped. They stayed awake. They longed for their Messiah.
- iv. We, like the disciples of the first century AD, like the Jewish people waiting for the Messiah...WE ARE WAITING.
- v. I've heard it said that if you DON'T want Jesus to come back on a certain day at a certain time, start a worldwide campaign to predict that moment, get everyone onboard, and then look forward to that moment. For SURE, Jesus will NOT come back at that day and time!
- vi. The believers were not to predict the second coming any more than the first. The believers' job is to do what the slaves did: Keep awake.
- vii. In the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow (which is civil twilight), and at dawn. Now, this parable was not about NOT getting any sleep. This parable is about the disciples' readiness to follow Jesus until he came back.
- viii. Advent is coming! Awaken to Advent at all times!

3. Application

- A. As we begin to orient our lives to Advent and Christmas this year, what does all this have to do with us...with you and me?
- B. Well, maybe you have a routine like Stacy and I do. Our alarm clock goes off most days at 5:30am. We roll out of bed, put on our workout clothes, head to our workout spot in the living room, and get our heart rates up. Then we do

our devotions and pray, cleanup, eat, and head out the door for the day. It's the alarm clock that usually gets is all going, even on those days when one or both of us might awake prior to the alarm. The alarm clock is the signal. We wait for it. Sometimes, we curse it. But it's our sign to get up...to **awaken**.

- C. Before the alarm goes off, it's dark. Unless you have one of those clocks that shines on the ceiling or something, you don't know what time it is or when the alarm will ring.
- D. During that early morning, pre-alarm time, God is there, waiting to meet with you. Waiting to prepare you. Ready to orient you - not to the to do list or even to prayer - but to **Him**. The day WILL come, but it's **God** who **made** the day. It's God who will fill your day. It's God who wants you to yield your day to Him before it even begins. Before the alarm - when it's darkest.
- E. And this isn't just about a single day in your life, but about your life of days on this earth. It's all about God's work of incarnation...of indwelling the world and YOU with His power and glory.
- F. See, because the same power and glory that'll appear in the clouds when Jesus comes back, is the power and glory that is in YOU when Jesus is IN you now!!
- G. So, what should you and I do during this season...and in our lives...as we keep awake when it seems darkest?**
- H. Every era of human history has claimed that, "These are the darkest of days. Jesus is coming back soon." I think that says more about humanity than it does about Jesus' plan to return, honestly. We create messes and then claim that Jesus must be coming soon.
- I. We don't know the day or hour. What we DO know is that in the current darkness of COVID, political fighting, unemployment, inflation, wars and rumors of wars, sexual immorality, crime and hatred, Jesus is preparing to shine HIS light. Our job is to be ready to reflect His light that will be coming into the world.
- J. Start with preparing your heart for Christmas in a new way this year.**
 - i. I think supply chain issues and worker shortages and delivery delays is possibly the biggest gift we can receive this year.
 - ii. I'm oversimplifying it and may be missing the point, but it forces you and me to do simple things like shop locally at small businesses and maybe scale back on the consumerism.
 - iii. But this isn't a sermon about that. This is a sermon about being ready for Jesus' coming. The gift of all the world's problems is that we can take the focus OFF all of that, and focus it completely on Jesus, who rescues us.
 - iv. Spend time loving your family and others and less time buying. Spend more time sharing your life and love for Jesus and less time shopping.

- v. At no time in my lifetime have we had an opportunity to do what we say every year that we want to do. So let's DO it!
 - vi. In the proverbial darkness, let's awaken to Advent by preparing our hearts.
- K. Then, as you wait for the alarm to sound, indicating Jesus' return, **wake up to God's signs in your life now.**
- i. God wants you to stay awake while you wait.
 - ii. You and I can get so lulled into thinking that the current state of our lives is all there is to this existence.
 - iii. Last week, we talked about the good life versus the life that is good. God is calling you to live the life that is good, always growing in discipleship.
 - iv. When you're convinced that life is TOO busy, TOO crowded, TOO full, and TOO tiring, that's the time to simplify and slow down...to, as John Mark Comer write, "...to ruthlessly eliminate hurry in your life."
 - v. The awareness that life is too busy and crowded are fig tree leaves signaling to you that changes are needed. You can't keep going like you are. Something has to give in order for Jesus to speak into your heart and say, "I Am He." "I am the One who is at the center of all this universe." "I am the One that holds the past, present, and future in my hands." "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. What you are experiencing is OK, but I am more...MY words will not pass away, even when every other thing in your life does." "I am coming back."
 - vi. "Instead of chasing after other things in life...chase after me...and teach your children to chase after me. There, ultimately, is nothing else."
- L. In the darkness, God is preparing to shine His light of HOPE in our world.

4. Conclusion

- A. If you're asleep, awaken! If you're awake, stay awake! If your neighbor is asleep, wake them up! (seriously...wake them up lol)
- B. Today is the day of salvation! This season is our gift of preparation!
- C. It may be darkest before the dawn, but the light is coming!
- D. Awaken to Advent! Let's pray...