

Caffeine & Chamomile Tea
Psalm 108:1-6
Mark 13:24-37

I don't think this congregation needs to be told to "keep awake". After all, this may be one of the busiest times of year for us! With the business of Thanksgiving behind us, we move now to focus on Christmas. Shopping, travel plans, family arrangements, Christmas decorations, feasts to plan, and the list goes on. It is more of a time of sleep deprivation than one of sleeping in. In our culture of excessive caffeine in the morning and things like sleep aid and chamomile tea before bed, we surely don't have a problem with wakefulness!

But as much time, energy, and lack of sleep we put into planning for Christmas, our efforts are seldom pointed toward the coming of the Christ child. In other words, we may be busy being busy and certainly awake and alert, but it is not for the purpose of the real reason for this season. Advent is a time of preparation and waiting, and in essence we do this every year. We prepare for Christmas Day festivities: the big feast, the family gathering, the gifts and more gifts, and setting aside normal daily routines to enjoy the big day. But as wonderful as that is and as much as that feels good to us, we more often than not totally miss the whole point of Christmas.

Waiting for the birth of the Messiah was something that continued over centuries. Faithful Jews longed for the day when God would provide a Messiah, a Savior, who would lead their people into victory. They longed for the prophesied descendant of David to come and restore God's kingdom. God had promised King David that he would bear an offspring who would become king forever. King David was known to the Israelites as the greatest King. It was under David's rule that the whole kingdom of Israel was brought under one rule. Knowing that the future king would come from his line brought comfort to the people. They trusted that this future king would save them from the hands of their oppressors. They had come to trust that this king would bring them salvation as well as peace and harmony. But they also understood that this future king would be from God as the anointed one.

Waiting for the Son of God to be born brought hope to the Israelites in the midst of difficult times. For thousands of years, hope in the coming Messiah sustained them through wars, oppression, and everyday difficult situations. The hope of God's salvation through the Anointed One motivated Jews to live on in their faith even when having faith worked against their daily living. Their longing and anticipation provided the very foundation for their lives. Hope became their ultimate motivation. Consider this example:

A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing--we're behind."

"Boy," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged."

"Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"¹

When hope is the motivation, the efforts are directed toward that hope. Christmas in most cases, no longer represents hope. Rather it is more often than not portrayed as a family reunion that may or may not include a birthday celebration of Jesus. In this way we think of Christmas as some past memory of what has been and not of what is to come. Hope is no longer the motivation of our celebration.

¹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/hope.htm> (accessed November 22, 2011)

This is where Mark's comments remind us that this is not simply about remembering some past event, but rather the hope of what is to come! The birth of Jesus is not just about our past, he is about our future. This is why during this time of advent, we not only prepare to celebrate our past with Jesus, but we also prepare for our future with Christ.

Mark reminds us that we do not know the day nor the hour upon which Jesus Christ will return. Nevertheless we are to beware and keep alert and be prepared. Be awake to the hope of our future and of God's promise of Christ's return. Be alert, and pay attention to how you focus your time and energy. Do you celebrate Christmas with hope and anticipation? Or does that thought even cross your mind? Do you spend time with family thankful for the blessing of one another in the salvation of the Lord or do you dread having to deal with that family member who you think doesn't deserve God's love and mercy?

According to a traditional Hebrew story, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?"

The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and reverence no other god."

When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulders, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air.

When the old man had departed, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"²

As we anticipate the coming of the Christ child and the hope of our eternal salvation, let us remember that this season is one of hope and grace. The hope and grace we have we can extend to others: to our family and friends and to strangers as well. When we demonstrate our faith by placing our focus on the hope of Jesus in this season, we become a reflection of God's love and grace for others to witness. May this season of Advent be one in which you truly have your heart and focus aimed toward the love and grace of God and the hope of God's salvation extended for you. Amen.

Prayer:

Gracious God,

Help us to focus this advent season on what truly matters: your love and grace and salvation.

May we keep our eyes upon the hope you have given us and demonstrate that hope in all that we do this Christmas season. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

² Thomas Lindberg. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/p/patience.htm> (accessed November 22, 2011).