

“Preparation”
Mark 13: 24-37

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Whenever Thanksgiving falls late on the calendar, I notice it more than when any other holiday is later or earlier than is typical. Thanksgiving’s lateness has the effect of making an already rushed time of year seem even more hectic. Instead of having a week of a buffer as we do in most other years, we only have one or two days to rush from the family visits, football games, and turkey leftovers to hanging greens, pulling out ornaments, and shopping the sales to prepare for Christmas. For our college students, I imagine it is harder to settle in at home knowing that finals are right there on the horizon. There is precious little time to savor the days of Thanksgiving and gratitude without feeling the stress of the transition to another new month and season ahead of us.

So in the middle of this rushed week and this abrupt transition from Thanksgiving to Advent, I can't help but feel like our scripture for today would be more appropriate for years when there is more time and more transition space leading up to the first Sunday in Advent. The theme for today's Scripture passage is Keep watch! Stay alert and stay awake! I hear that and I think, “Stay awake? But haven't I earned my post-turkey nap? I feel like I have been awake for days!”

I am certain that at this point in the holiday weekend many of us have been awake for too long—suffering sleep deprivation from traveling schedules, the exhaustion that comes from hosting guests or being a guest yourself, and trying to juggle holiday weekend traditions with the rest of life and responsibilities that refuse to slow down. Instead of an admonition to stay awake, I think that scripture a passage that tells us its okay to rest or to stop moving so quickly might be more welcome today.

Every year Advent starts out with this same reminder to keep awake because Christ is coming. It's an important reminder—a message to tune our senses into this new season, tune our prayers into a

place of anticipation and watchfulness for God's presence in the world, and tune our life into the coming of Christ. However, I think there is a danger when we hear the same message over and over because at a certain point, we stop listening to it the same way. And in our modern world, when this has become a holiday season that is often overwhelming and overrun with to-do lists, obligations, and high expectations, some of us might feel like we can't take one more voice telling us what we need to do or how we need to do it.

When it comes to Christmas, certainly no one needs another thing added to their plate. But the danger of hearing these Scripture passages year after year and of tuning it out because we either think it is demanding a level of piety that feels too difficult or we read it and are not sure what it is demanding or we have simply heard it so much we are no longer listening, the danger of the repetition of this Scripture passage in our minds is that we have forgotten that they have very little to do with Christmas.

In this first week of Advent, there is no mention of Christmas. There is no mention of Mary or Joseph or the journey to Bethlehem. There is no hint at a baby Jesus—in fact it is a very grownup Jesus that is doing the talking in the Gospel passage from Mark. We are officially in the season that leads up to Christmas morning, but we are not there yet. A big part of Advent is about the journey we make to get to Christmas, which comes with the recognition that even though we are journeying and preparing, we have not arrived! I was listening to On Being on NPR this morning and Carrie Newcomer, a folk singer, was talking about thresholds. She said that a threshold is that point when you leave one thing behind and you are facing the next thing, but you aren't there yet. You are standing in the doorway looking out. That is what Advent is—a threshold season.

For me, as someone who is so aware of the shortness of the month ahead of us and worried that I will blink and miss it, this idea of a whole season of transition is a relief. If I don't feel ready for Christmas to be here yet, and if I want to linger over this post-Thanksgiving time of gratitude, that is quite all-right. Taking that timeless journey with the holy family to Bethlehem means acknowledging that we still have a long ways to go. That we are still preparing. That it is not yet Christmas and that is

okay.

In the midst of the rush towards Christmas, it is a breath of fresh air to hear in one place, in one source, in one scripture passage, a reminder that we don't have to be ready for the festivities and celebrations and another round of family gatherings. Today's message of staying alert and staying awake might better be interpreted as stay in the moment. Stay with today, and don't be so quick to jump ahead to December 25th. Instead of being a reminder to do more or move more quickly or be the first to reach Christmas morning, it is a call to do a bit less leaping forward and more settling in. If it feels like we are running towards Christmas at full speed, Advent is our reminder that if we rush too fast, we are in danger of missing the journey, and in Advent, the journey is the point of the season.

On, today, this first day of Advent, we are not talking about Christmas. Today is about today. It is about looking for Christ in our lives right now. So the question of these cryptic passages we hear over and over again is, “What do you need in order to celebrate the journey of this season? What will help you hear the Advent message that it is okay to not be ready to leap ahead to the next holiday, that it is okay to still be transitioning from one place to the next, and it is okay to be wherever you are today, in this moment? What do you need in order to recognize Christ in the world today? Not a month from now, but just today?”

The tension of Advent is staying in the moment, savoring and soaking up this time before Christmas as its own unique time when the outside world is ready to leap ahead to that final Christmas morning destination. There is a real tension in naming and claiming difference between the time right now and time that will soon be, the Advent season we are in and the Christmas season soon to be. We often conflate the two but Advent is the season of waiting, anticipating, and being aware of God already around us, and Christmas is the celebration of the time when the Jesus was newly in the world and the miracle that God could be fully present and fully with us in a way we had never before known but now know to be true every day of our lives.

The tension of Advent is allowing this to be its own time—and to take the time for this

transition and this opportunity for introspection and preparation before the celebrations begin anew. I suspect for each of us, we will have different ways to help us settle into this season. We will have different answers to the question “What do you need in order to enjoy the quiet journey of this season?” I can't answer that question for you, but I can tell you two things that help me settle into the Advent season and in turn, better prepare me for the Christmas season that is yet to come.

The first thing I find incredibly helpful is an Advent calendar. For me, Advent calendars are a reminder that every single day is sacred, not just the 25th day. I love the calendars where you open up a tiny little door each day and discover something inside. Last year Beth and I started using a Lego Advent calendar at home. Behind each little door, there was a small handful of Legos and each day you built something different—maybe a tiny fireplace or a tiny tree or a tiny person that sat at a tiny table. Together they formed a holiday scene, but by building something each and every day, I was reminded of the value and importance of each day. Each day became its own ritual and something to look forward to.

If you don't like Legos, I hear there are some nice calendars with chocolate inside. Or ones where you place your own token inside to later open and discover each day of the month. I find that practice of taking time out of each day and celebrating that day for what it is, is incredibly helpful for staying grounded and present. Advent calendars are framed as a countdown to Christmas, but they really help in slowing time down and reminding me that every day is sacred in its own right.

The second thing I am doing to settle into Advent is something that is new for me this year. It is an experiment of sorts. This year, I am going to have an Advent mascot. That is, I am taking a character from the Christmas story, and I am claiming them as my own this month. So in the same way that I would think about a close friend or keep a special family member at the forefront of my mind, I am going to keep this figure in my mind and in my thoughts. It's like a prayer practice for me, and as I think about them, I am going to think about their journey leading up to Christmas.

We squeeze the whole Christmas story into one long reading on Christmas Eve, but it really

unfolded in a period that took over a year. So I'm taking up that familiar story from one perspective, using it to remind me of how long this time really is, and how each moment on the journey to Christmas was an important one. I could imagine doing this with Mary or Joseph or even Jesus, but for this first attempt at an Advent mascot, I am going to choose John the Baptist. He is not someone we automatically think of when we think of Christmas, and he wasn't even in Bethlehem for Jesus' birth, but his story is very much wrapped up in Jesus's story. He was Jesus's cousin, and his mother Elizabeth was Mary's comforter during her pregnancy. I love that there are similarities to John and Jesus' births and I love that much of John's life was about preparing people to know and follow Jesus. You could say that his life's purpose was about preparation, and in that way, I expect he will be a fantastic Advent mascot for me to think about this coming month—to think about his own journey from womb to prophet, through times of waiting to times of proclamation. By diving into John's journey, I hope to better focus on my own journey through Advent.

I've found two things that I hope will help me more fully step into this time of Advent, and I wonder what it is will be for others, for you. What will make this year different from years past? What will help you listen to the Biblical story with fresh ears? What will help you slow down the time before Christmas? If you don't need to be reminded to stay awake, what message are you looking for this Advent? How do you hope that God will enter your life, and what do you need in order to recognize God's presence? This is a season of questions and questioning, of preparing and anticipating and adjusting to make room for God and for Christ and for sacredness to your days. It is a season of slowing down when everything outside of us is telling us to hurry up and move faster. What is it that will make this season sacred for you? We are standing at the threshold, looking out into a new season before us. What is it that you see?