***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

Mark 13:24-37 Rev. Tyler Amundson November 29, 2020

***Keep Awake***

Today we begin a journey. I have never been on it before, I doubt any of you have either. Today we begin a spiritual journey of seeking a manger. Like the animals who seek it out, we are hungry. Today we begin a sacred journey to a little town. Like those seeking refuge from the storms of the world, we are awash in challenges. Today we begin a messy journey to find a child. Like those wishing to be mothers and fathers, we seek new life. Today we begin a holy journey towards God’s love. Like those before us, we are not sure what it will look like.

Now you may say, “I have done life before, I know what you’re talking about.” To which I say, “Could you have imagined the year we have had?”

I want to invite you that life is not about knowing it all, or saying, “I got this figured out.” This season of Advent, preparing for Christmas can’t be about that. Instead this season in the life of faith is about saying, “I don’t know what is coming, but I am a beloved child of God. Jesus, I trust you will enter this world, in some unexpected way. God surprise me with your love, let it transform me.”

Then, I want you to remember that today begins a retelling of an old story, that began a long time ago in a village far or not so far away. When a little baby was born and changed everything.

Be ready…for everything to change

Would you pray with me?

O Great Dreamer,
You dreamed up the stars in the sky.
You dreamed up that magic baby smell and the way cream sinks into coffee.
You dreamed up the crunch of fall leaves and jazz music.
You dreamed up wisteria and evergreen and the pure magic that is a six-foot-tall sunflower. And in the midst of all of that, you dreamed up a dream for your people—

a dream of hope and justice,

a dream for eyes wide open, to both the world’s suffering and the world’s beauty. So today, as we read scripture, we ask that you would plant that same dream in us. Pour out your Spirit on our hearts and minds so that we may see what you see,

and dream what you dream. Gratefully we pray, amen.

The scripture for this Sunday comes from the gospel of Mark 13:24-37. I will be reading today from the common English Bible. You may have heard this read once already today, but I invite you to listen again with ears of an anticipation. See what new things jumps out to you.

**24**“In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. **25**The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. **26**Then they will see the Human One[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%2013:24-37&version=CEB#fen-CEB-24736a)] coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. **27**Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven.

**A lesson from the fig tree**

**28**“Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. **29**In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that he’s near, at the door. **30**I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until all these things happen. **31**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

**32**“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows.**33**Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t know when the time is coming. **34**It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. **35**Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know when the head of the household will come,whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. **36**Don’t let him show up when you weren’t expecting and find you sleeping. **37**What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!”

This is a strange text to hear as you prepare for Christmas. In fact, I think most everyday Christians would be fascinated to read the suggested texts for this Sunday. Many of them do not even mention Jesus by name, instead they focus on the words of prophets speaking to people cast from their homes by war and principalities, or discuss family trees of ancient people, or in this case mention little apocalypses. In fact this passage is referred to by biblical scholars and commentaries as “the little apocalypse.”

Now I have had people ask me if the apocalypse is happening this year. Wondering if the chaos we experienced was evidence the world was ending. The challenge here is apocalypse really means “a revelation of something previously unknown.” It is the Apostle Paul’s phrase about we will see fully then, but now we see through a dim reflection. In truth we have faced hardship this year, and some listening may have faced their biggest challenges ever. However, for many of us the lights still turned on every day, the sun came up and our families faced very little adversity. If we are to learn from this strange story of a fig tree parable, as a text to get us ready for Christmas. Maybe we could do it by being aware we might learn something new if we really paid attention to the story of Jesus’ entrance into the world.

Bishop Karen Oliveto tells this story about preparing for this season.

One day, I cut too many corners trying to pack everything in I needed to get done. I flew out the door to do an early bit of grocery shopping before heading to church. When I returned, I opened the garage door and thought I smelled smoke. I immediately thought of my 92 year old neighbor whose house was connected to mine, and worried that she had left something burning on her stove. As I went up the steps, I saw smoke—her place must be on fire! I grabbed a phone and dialed 911. I was put on hold (!) and as I waited I heard crackling. I turned into my dining room and saw that the table was in flames. The fire was in MY house! And there, at the very center of the table, was the culprit: my Advent wreath, now with all the candles melted down into the table…

Moses encountered a burning bush. I had a burning dining room table. All my planning, rushing, DOING, came to a screeching halt that Advent. As the house was slowly put back together, I relearned how to be in the moment, to wait expectantly, to realize that the gift of God’s grace comes whether or not we are ready for it, and God will use just about anything—even a burning dining room table—to get our attention.

What is grabbing your attention this season. As I was preparing this sermon I stumbled across a sermon I wrote 6 years ago. In it I shared a heartfelt story about a young boy who hugged a police officer, even though he was frightened to. Frightened because the young man was black and he had heard that his brothers were dying more frequently at the hands of police. These two met because race was an issue facing our nation in increasing response to the challenges people of color were facing in our communities.

I was struck that that again happened with higher frequency in 2020, and we had massive marches even in the face of COVID-19. There was and is this year a growing tide of frustration with the political realities of our nation. There was and is a pandemic that has now taken the lives of 250,000 people just in our country. There was and is economic hits because of this pandemic changing families realities now. Fires burned massively in our country and tore apart the continent of Australia this year, and I lost count of the hurricanes.

So, I get why some folks asked if the world was ending, and if I preached about one of the challenges 6 years ago, then maybe the scripture is telling us what we need to hear. Stay alert, wake up, and be aware that God may be calling us to be ready for a change.

For me, I have hope as I read the scriptures, because God does not abandon his people. He sent Moses to lead the people to the promised land and prophets to guide people in exile. When people in the first century were facing challenges of poverty, and oppression, they begged for a messiah who would come conquer and change the world through violence. Instead, they got a babe, born in a manger. Hope is not wishing something would be the way we want it, it is staying alert for what God might do to transform the world.

Emilie Towns puts it this way:

“Hope means we have opened our eyes, hearts, minds, souls, very spirits
and now see and feel and touch and smell the joy and the agony living in the fractures of creation that is the irony of hope
for in our yearning for it
we often walk far away from it as we try to come home to it
we often live into the small and narrow spaces of life that stunt our growth
and demand far too little of us
because far too little is expected from us
or far too little gives us comfort
hope is one more piece to the fabric of the universe
one more way to signal this restless journey we are on
one more sign that Emmaus is not the end of the journey
but its beginning
you see, I don’t think hope is the end product on the assembly line of our lives
no, I think it is simply a part of the journey
part of the way in which we come to know God’s way in our lives with a richness that ripens and ripens and ripens . . .”[[1]](#footnote-1)

And hope is what dreams are made of, Langston Hughs writes:

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Dreams have the potential to transform us, but we have to be ready. Even in the smallest ways. Take for example Mike.

Mike was not a guy who liked Christmas. In fact, at some point he had thrown off the idea that receiving gifts was a good idea. Saying something like, “In my day when we got a gift it really mattered. Now it is all about people wanting more, wanting the right thing, and getting the right thing. I am done with gifts and getting them, I don’t want anything cheap cologne, cheap clothing, knick knacks that fill my basement, and ugly sweaters. Until people recognize what Christmas is all about, I don’t want a thing.”

Nan, Mike’s wife of some 48 years, was worried about Mike. Worried, that Mike was going to retire only to spend his time in his favorite armchair eating, watching old sitcoms or an occasional game, and living the life of “recliner passivity.” She was worried this cantankerous nature would take over his whole existence and that even during the Christmas season, when surely he could be generous man she knew him to be, he would instead be a Grinch. Then she got an idea.

The idea came when Nan and Mike were watching their kids at a wrestling match. There was one underprivileged school there and you could tell who they were. They had faded uniforms, threadbare t-shirts, sweats that were too big or too small. All of this stood out as they were overwhelmed in the competition by the schools that were more wealthy and had matching uniforms.

“Just look at those boys,” Mike bemoaned, “it just isn’t right. This sport may be all these boys really have. Sure they jump up after losing, but being beaten down again and again, it will take the heart right out of you.”

Nan did something different that Christmas. She tucked a single envelop with Mike’s name on it between ornaments on the tree. On Christmas morning after all the other presents were opened. Nan feigned ignorance, went to the tree and as if surprised said, “Why there is one more present. And, sweetheart, it has your name on it.”

Mike mumbled about not wanting anything that year, and Nan said, “Maybe you’ll like this.”

Mike took the envelope, eyed it suspiciously, and opened it. Inside was a single index card. On it a pledge typed out that said, “During the coming year, Nan would devote her considerable seamstress skills to making uniforms for that underprivileged team of wrestlers. Mike read it and mumbled, “Well at least its not peanut brittle.”

Nan held to her word and in January she got all her supplies out, got fabric and sat down to start the work. She sketched out her plans, after a while Mike wandered over and glanced at her work. He shook his head, “No, no, no, wrestling uniforms don't look like that, the colors are wrong. And how do you know the sizes of the players?”

“Well I was wondering about that, could you help me?” Nan asked.

Faster than a takedown Mike was off. He was at the school measuring the kids, to the fabric store to get the material. He joined nan in separating fabric, laying things out, separating backs and fronts and pinning numbers into place.

Of course it involved more trips to the school. The team was beside themselves at this idea of new uniforms, they wanted to be part of the project. Soon they were selling chocolate bars to buy new headgear and scheduling twice a day workouts to get ready for the next meet. Mike and Nan chaperoned away meets, took the youth to see college level wrestling. Mike even took a day as assistant coach, doing the best he could to keep up.

A year passed and Mike has so much fun that the next year he was poking around the Christmas tree. He toyed, “I wonder if there might be something for me this year.”

Thus started a family tradition that wound up in a script acted out each Christmas. Nan placing and envelope lodged in the branches of the tree. Then when all the other presents were opened the two would fane surprise over the last gift, and do their dance of finding out what it might be. Mike would jump up when Nan would find the card and even joke, “I hope it is not peanut brittle.”

They helped design a playground at a boys home, and organized car washed to fund it and volunteers to organize construction. Got a group of neighbors to build birdhouses and feeding stations for a local marshland project. And another they took on city hall with a band of local activists who wanted to take a vacant lot and transform it into a vibrant community garden.

Year after year, Mike and Nan carried on. Simple acts of kindness took root throughout the city. Each act germinated the seed of another envelope. Nan would later say, Those were the best years of our lives.” The town came alive and not only that Mike did too.

One year, just a few days before Christmas, Mike suffered a stroke and died. The family came from all over and gathered to attend a Christmas Eve funeral. Afterwards Nan did as she always did, despite the pestering to take it easy, she cared for others, served food, and then rebuffed early attempts by family to send her to bed.

Finally, everyone else was asleep and Nan put that last present under the tree and switched off the lights in the room. The glow of the Christmas tree came and Nan stopped.

Memories adorned the tree…babies first Christmas, blue bulbs from their first Christmas when the could afford nothing, a Statue of Liberty from a trip Mike loved that they took to New York. All of these fragments passed before Nan’s eyes.

Then she got up opened a drawer pulled out a white envelope she had put there several weeks before. On it said, “For Mike.”

Then after staring at it for a while she slipped it into the tree saying, “This is for you, sweetheart. This is for you.” Unplugged the tree and went up to her room.

The next morning she got up and saw she had slept well past when she should have for having grandkids on Christmas morning. She heard one mother downstairs say, “Don’t worry grandma will be down soon, then we can open presents.”

Nan came down the stares and saw her family, mostly up now moving around the space. Then she stopped. She looked at the tree and there in the tree we dozens of white envelopes buried in its branches.

Each son, daughter, in-law, grandchild had placed their envelopes in the tree. Pledges of projects for Mike, in his memory. Somehow the grief eased, if even just for a moment, she longed for Mike. Yet, she could see the envelopes continuing into the future.

And Nan knew how pleased Mike would be. He was, after all, a man who loved Christmas.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hope this season, stay awake this season to the dreams of God. And be ready for the unveiling of God’s tiny self in powerful and unexpected ways.

Would you please join me in an affirmation of faith as we enter this season together:

Affirmation of Faith

One: We believe in God.

All: We believe that God has dreams for humanity.

One: We believe in the Holy Spirit.

All: We believe that the Holy Spirit comforts us when our dreams turn to nightmares.

One: We believe in Jesus.

All: We believe that Jesus walked this world to wake us up, Inviting us to be the church in the world.

One: We believe in dreams.

All: We believe in the power that dreams have to show us a new way.

One: So in this Advent season,

All: We are those who dream and those who wake up. May it be so. Amen.

1. —Emilie M. Townes. From the transcript of her keynote address at the “Migration and Border Crossings” Conference co-hosted by Columbia Seminary and the Emory Center for Law and Religion, February 2019. The full transcript is featured in Columbia Theological Seminary’s online publication, @ *This Point—Theological Investigations in Church and Culture*, Fall 2019—Vol. 13, No.2. ctsnet.edu/at-this-point/displacement-trauma/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.upperroom.org/disciplines/en-2017-12-10> I have also heard it performed live by Frank Rogers Jr. who tells it much better than I. Thanks for this great story. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)