

Connect with God: God with Us  
Mark 13:24-37  
December 3, 2017  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

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**Mark 13:24-37**

*'But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,*

*and the moon will not give its light,*

<sup>25</sup>*and the stars will be falling from heaven,*

*and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

<sup>26</sup>*Then they will see "the*

*Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>Then he will send out the angels, and  
gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

<sup>28</sup>*'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves,  
you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is*

*near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things  
have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

<sup>32</sup>*'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the  
Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going*

*on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands  
the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of  
the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find  
you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'*

What a joyful day in the life of our church! Today marks the onset of the Advent season and also our transition into the next phase of our year's CONNECT theme. CONNECT is one of the core practices of our faith which, along with the other practices of worship, serve, learn and invite, helps equip us to follow Jesus. Our theme began in the fall with "CONNECT to each other". We intentionally gathered and nurtured relationships as we celebrated our return from summer and the restoration of our community of faith. Now, with Advent, our theme transitions to CONNECT to God.

We're kicking off all our seasons of CONNECT with Festival Sundays, when we come together in one worship service and meal. Festivals take us

back to biblical times, when the ancient Israelites would make seasonal pilgrimages to the temple for festivals, marking their shared identity as people of God, and pointing themselves and their lives to the one true God.

And so, today, thousands of years later, we gather as one body, sharing our common identity in Christ, connecting to each other and connecting to God. I can think of no better reason for a festival!

Since this idea of CONNECT has been on my mind in our shared life together as a church, it has also been coming to mind at home. For most of this fall, our family's home has been undergoing some renovation. It feels more like a *lot* of renovation, but only because of the disruption! I know many of you are in the midst of construction, too, and can relate. Watching this process over time, and thinking about connecting, has had me paying attention to all the connections required to make a home strong and enduring. In fact, I should take this opportunity to make a public apology to our builder, my new friend Jim Hogel, who has patiently endured my many questions about construction connections! Oh wow, the poor guy. My daughter told me we didn't pay him enough to deal with me! So, thanks so much, Jim. The connections are endless – beams and joists, dry wall, flooring, each coming together in their own way. I know you work-trip people are following me! Some of the connections are interlocking, others just butting up against one another sealed with the help of adhesives and glues. There are roller joints, dovetails, and mortis and tenon joints – all unique ways the building materials connect. There are also electrical connections – so interdependent that if one part falters, the whole circuit fails. And plumbing connections, wow, all I can say about those is that when they don't work you find yourselves in a real mess! The nature of these connections, how they actually transfer power or water or structural integrity, varies a great deal, but each connection is essential for the optimal functioning and endurance of the structure.

We humans thrive on connections too. We are created as inter-connected beings, stronger as people when we have strong connections. It is not right for us to be alone, we read in the Genesis creation story (Gen 2:18). We are meant to connect, yet like building connections, we all connect differently. How we relate to each other and who we comfortably connect to varies, just like the parts of a building structure. What causes our connections to break down, and how we repair those connections differs too. Yet, the importance of connecting remains the same. We must connect to thrive and endure, to fulfill our God-ordained purpose in the world.

But if our focus was just about our connections to each other, we could be talking about any organization and gathering anywhere, for any purpose. But *we* gather because we are also connected to God; in whom we live, move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Our Advent theme, "God with us," expresses the deep nature of this connection to God. God *with* us. Advent reminds us that God is *with* us – God came to us in Jesus, God in Christ promised to stay with us, and God in Christ will come again. God. With. Us. If we ever, in the life of this country and world, needed the reassurance of God-with-us, this is surely the time! Because our connection to God connects us to our Source of hope, and we sure need hope now.

Our reality though, is that connecting to God is not all that easy for us. We have so many distractions that pull us away from a strong sense of God's presence. Pressures of daily life and work, worries about our health or our family, time constraints, not to mention the distractions of our culture, false promises and claims - that all takes our eyes off the true source of joy and peace and love. Our gospel reading today ends with the imperative to "keep awake", but what are we keeping awake to? What our world keeps us awake to is often what cuts us off from a wakefulness to God.

In our lesson from Mark's gospel, brought to life by Bryan, we hear an apocalyptic description of God-with-us. Wow, seems like it would be difficult

to not be awake to God's presence in this scene! The writer describes power that shakes the heavens, darkness covering the earth, and stars falling out of the sky, as the Son of Man enters into our human condition. It's a scene right out of *Stranger Things*, if you're watching that Netflix series. (By the way, buckle up, Season Three has just been promised!) While this Bible text sounds like science fiction to us, this scene from Mark, to its ancient audience, was a source of hope – hope and trust in God's transforming presence in a broken world.

When Mark's gospel was written, the people of God were suffering. Nations were at war, the Israelites were in exile in a strange land; and their temple, the place they believed was God's dwelling place on earth, had been completely destroyed. The world as they knew it was ending. The scene describes a powerful God coming in to battle evil and rescue God's people. Humankind could not do it on its own. We proved to be incapable of building the kingdom God envisioned, so God steps in. Apocalyptic literature, rather than being merely a story of destruction, was written to provide hope. Mark's gospel reminds us of the power of God to intervene and redeem. It's a reminder that even when the powers of suffering and evil overwhelm us - powers which today we might name as political corruption; sexual abuse, violence, and cancer - even when the powers of suffering and evil seem stronger, God's grace breaks through and wins. And sometimes that feels pretty disruptive. It is to *that* in-breaking, to the power of God breaking into our midst, that the gospel tells us to "keep awake."

Keep awake. The English translations vary: Be alert. Stay on watch. Look out. The Greek connotes a vigilance about this staying awake. This is not just awake as in the opposite of sleeping, but more like a waiting with expectation. I suppose it's like the difference for a child between waiting for Christmas and waiting for Santa. When you're waiting for Christmas to come, it just feels like a lot of long days. Sometimes with excitement, sometimes

with impatience, the days drag on as you continue to hope for Christmas to be here. For a child it feels like it will never come. But waiting for Santa is a different awake. It's a wide-eyed awake; a perk-up-at-every-sound awake. Because you *know* that Santa WILL come. The sound of a door, of footsteps, of paper rustling, you listen for the signs – could it be?

This is the state of vigilant alertness we are encouraged to employ as we wait for God. It's the kind of watchfulness necessary to discern God's presence among the distractions of our lives. Our PNC Study Team mentioned that they are practicing discernment. They are training themselves to notice God's movement among us in this time, to discern God's presence. They would tell you it's a different paying attention; a very different listening. Because God doesn't always come in the ways we're used to, at the times we want, doing things we expect. Sometimes God comes as a still small voice, spoken in a rare moment of peace when your thoughts are elsewhere; or coming from the quietest person in the room who only says just one thing, and that's the one thing we all need to hear. Sometimes the presence of God is more pressing and uncomfortable. Like the times when our relationships are in disrepair, and we know what we need to do to make it right, but we resist because it's hard or our egos are in the way or we feel too vulnerable. Then God speaks, whether through another person, or through Scripture, or deep within us, and we have to act because it's too uncomfortable not to, and find God acting with us. Then other times, the presence of God is much more powerful, feeling as disruptive as the scene from Mark. Shocking us out of our complacency or routine. Perhaps we are seeing that disruption in our country today. Victims of sexual abuse coming forward in masses, waking us up to injustice. It's not a peaceful in-breaking, it's extremely disruptive. Like God coming as a baby, into a violent world. Disruptive and necessary.

Discerning the presence of God takes a wakefulness, and it also takes a connection. When we are connected, in relationship, we know what to listen

for, to pay attention to. The parent waiting for their teenager to come home after a night out with friends, knows what to be awake for – the flash of headlights, the family car door slam, the squeak of the hinges on the entry door, the familiar toss of the shoes in the mudroom. Familiar. Connecting to God makes the watchfulness easier because God's movement becomes more familiar. The apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesians, that God would give them wisdom as they came to know God, because then they would know the hope to which they are called (Eph 1:17). Knowing God, connecting to God, is knowing hope. So we stop to pray, to connect to our Source of wisdom and hope. We pause to worship, to be reminded of God's sovereignty, and faithfulness in Christ. We take time for study, turning to the Word of God to understand God's ways so we recognize God's voice above the world's. And we connect to each other, because it is often in relationships when we come to most fully experience, and connect to, the loving presence of God.

Still, it is not easy. With even our most watchful ear and eye, with our most pleading prayer, our most attentive worship, we miss God's voice, we lose the sense of God with us. Whether we get lost in our grief, or distracted by worry, or drawn to false promises, there are and will continue to be times when we can't feel God's presence beside us. To this community of Mark's passage that had grown weary with waiting and troubled by the delay of Christ's second coming, and to us today, Scripture gives us hope. Like the fig tree which will put forth leaves in the spring promising summer will come, God *will* come. The master of the house *will* return. Into a troubled world and our troubled lives, God *will* break in. It may be different for all of us, like all the myriad of unique ways building materials connect, God will connect with each of us uniquely. But by God's grace, God *will* connect to us, to redeem and restore us. It's a connection that will not let us down.

I heard theologian Walter Brueggemann say recently that our hope in God is matched by God's yearning for us. We can be comforted by that grace. God is yearning for the same connection we ourselves long for.

So stay awake. Be alert. It might be disruptive. It probably will surprise us. But God will come. And God has come. And God will come again. May it be so. Amen.