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## After the Suffering (nee Keep Awake!)

Isaiah 64: 1-9 & Mark 13:24-37

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 30, 2014 by Christy Lohr Sapp

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The nature of Chapel worship is such that we have to do a number of things in advance each week. This Sunday's bulletin, for example, had to be proof-read on Friday a week ago in order to accommodate the printer's schedule with the Thanksgiving holiday, and a lot has happened in the world and in this country in the week and a half since then. When the bulletin went to press, today's sermon was titled "Keep Awake!" That seemed like an appropriate title for the first Sunday in Advent. But, as I watched the events of last week unfold, as violence and protesting unfurled out from an epicenter of Ferguson, Missouri to cities all over this country, it was no longer the gospel writer's admonition to keep awake that struck me. Instead, my eyes and my heart kept going back to the opening verse: *But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.* (Mark 13: 24-25) If I had it to do over again, I would have titled this sermon, "After the Suffering".

There seems to be much suffering going on around us. Sure, Thursday officially marked the start of the holiday season, but turkey, tinsel and twinkle lights seem so trivial in the midst of shootings, rioting and tear gassing. For many people all over the world, the twin realities of injustice and inequality feel all too fresh for a festive start of the season. In Cleveland, a twelve-year old boy was fatally shot when police mistook his toy gun for an imminent threat. One news source reported on Wednesday that a man in a New York City protest died after being placed in a "choke hold" by a police officer. In Oakland, a city that is no stranger to conflict between law enforcement personnel and civilians, police cars were vandalized and businesses were attacked. The reactions to the death of Michael Brown remind us that there is much suffering in our world. The public outcry in response to the acquittal of Darren Wilson reminds us that there is much suffering in our nation. The lament of parents, friends, neighbors and public servants reminds us that there is much suffering in our lives.

*In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.*

For those who feel marginalized, for any who are weary, I wonder when it will be "after the suffering". For the parents of Michael Brown, it might feel like the sun has been darkened. For the police officers, troopers and members of the National Guard trying to maintain order in the midst of chaos, it might feel like the heavens are shaking. For those looking for a sign, for those who are dismayed and for any who struggle with inequalities, insecurities, anxieties and fears, it might feel like God is coming down from on high while the world trembles. Are we in the end times - in the midst of the signs that the gospel writer foretells?

Today's gospel is set just prior to the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry. In the verses preceding our reading for this morning Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple and the presence of false prophets. He warns his followers to stay alert and not be led astray. Then, in the chapter that follows this one Jesus is betrayed, arrested and taken before the high priest for judgment. While in the garden with Peter, James and John, Jesus says to them, "*Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.*" (Mark 14:38) In chapter 15 Jesus is crucified, darkness comes over the whole land, and the curtain of the Temple is torn from top to bottom. All of this takes place in just a few short chapters at the end of Mark.

Throughout these chapters, Mark uses apocalyptic imagery that foreshadows calamity and the crucifixion of Christ. Using language from texts like Isaiah that would have been familiar to a first century audience -

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence* (Is – 64:1) Mark's writing calls the reader to attention and weaves the narrative into a larger whole – from cultural and historical scriptural memory to modern political and spiritual reality.

In multiple places in the gospel of Mark, the apocalyptic tone is set and Jesus challenges his followers to be alert and stay awake for the signs that are to be revealed. Even the markers of time in our text today are significant as they point to the passion narrative. This morning we heard the warning: *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.* (Mark 13: 35) Recall that on the night he is handed over, Jesus' followers let him down with betrayal, sleep and denial in the evening, at midnight in the garden, and before the rooster crows at dawn – each of the times alluded to in today's text. Mark's repetition of images and phrases is meant to grab our attention. This is a sign that these words are important. It is like text written in bold, underlined and highlighted. The gospel warning gives signs of the end times, but Mark also gives us the clues that the signs of the coming Messiah have already been realized: Christ has come. Christ is coming. Christ will come again.

This text foretells the death of Jesus and points to the events around his crucifixion. It points to the persecution of the innocent and the rejection of God's message. It does not tell of a star in the East and a babe in a manger. So, why do we read this pre-passion text at the start of the Advent season? Does it not seem counter-intuitive to start the liturgical year at the end of the story? Is it not an odd juxtaposition to have the crucifixion prophesied as we prepare for the nativity? If we read today's text as merely a piece of apocalyptic literature that foretells end times, then we miss the reason for its placement at the start of this season and we miss the challenge it offers us today.

On this the first Sunday in Advent, we are also called to anticipatory hope. We are reminded to wait with patience for the coming of our Lord, but we also revel in the reminder that the Messiah has already come. We live in the "now" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God. The "now" and the "not yet". It is one of those Christian paradoxes that is simultaneously vexing and intriguing. The kingdom was once: Christ has come. We enjoy the assurances of God's love for us given through a good creation and the Incarnation. The kingdom is now: Christ is coming. We strive to let the word of God comfort and challenge us in our lament and daily struggles. And the kingdom is not yet: Christ will come again. We cling hopefully to the gospel promise of resurrection.

Despite the incongruity of hearing about the passion as we anticipate the birth, today's gospel text is a great way to kick off the Advent season. It is a reminder that we are embarking on a journey of waiting and watching. But it is also more than that. As is the nature of apocalyptic literature, it also reveals things not previously known. It is a reminder of the now and the not yet. It is a revealing of the presence of God already in our midst and a reminder that there is more to come. The waiting and watching of this season leads us not only to a bright star and tiny baby in Bethlehem but also to a dark day and suffering man on Golgotha. God enters the world. God joins humanity in suffering. God sets all people free.

After the suffering of Jesus, the world is dark and the heavens quake. But in the wake of that suffering, the world is also redeemed. Christ joins the world in its suffering and tears the curtain that divides humanity and divinity. Christ joins the world in its lament and institutes the kingdom of God on earth. Christ joins the world in its preparations for his return and offers a spirit of hope and assurance.

Christ does not abolish the suffering, however. Rather, Christ comes and works with the people of God to usher in the kingdom in the midst of suffering. He invites his followers to do this through prayer, right belief and common action. Christ implores his friends to stay awake in the garden and pray with him. He

warns his disciples not to be swayed by false prophets. He calls us all to work together for the good of the whole.

Oliver Mtukudzi, a Zimbabwean songwriter and human rights activist, wrote a song that would be a perfect complement to our Advent anthems. The song "Wake Up" challenges us to "wake up – open your eyes – unite – don't waste time." For Mtukudzi this is a call to action in the face of the realities that have crippled his homeland for decades: political unrest, rising HIV rates, and wide-spread poverty. Yet it is a message that we in this country would do well to hear, too. "Wake up – open your eyes!" Whether they are economic, racial, political, environmental, or ideological, open your eyes to the inequalities that exist around us. "Unite!" Join together with those who fight for justice and the kingdom of God. "Don't waste time!" There is a lot of work to do to make God's kingdom known in the now, and we do not know when the time will come for Christ's return. We are all called to keep awake and look for the signs of Christ in our midst. But where do you find the kingdom of God around you? Where will you look for signs of the Spirit this season? Perhaps this is where my two sermon titles coincide.

*After the suffering* we should, indeed, *keep awake*. We should keep awake so that we heed Jesus' call not to be led astray by false prophets. False prophets clamor for revenge instead of restoration. False prophets promote personal glory instead of the glory of God. False prophets stir up a spirit of discord instead of the Spirit of peace.

*After the suffering* we should, indeed, *keep awake*. We should keep awake so that we do not, ourselves, become false prophets who teach of earthly glory rather than heavenly redemption. Today's reading from Isaiah reminds us: *O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.* (Isaiah 64:8) We should keep awake so as not to forget that we are all God's people. People who are made in God's image, not vice versa. We should keep awake so that we do not try to make God into our image. We should keep awake that we do not let racism, sexism, ageism or any other prejudices keep us from seeing the people beside us as beloved.

*After the suffering* we should, indeed, *keep awake*. We should keep awake so that we can see the signs of God's kingdom in our midst – signs that are grand and celestial, but signs that are also subtle and small: signs of kindness, acts of forgiveness and moments of humility, signs of generosity and compassion. These may seem like simple signs of the in-breaking of the Spirit into our hearts, but they can resonate profoundly in the lives of our neighbors. We should keep awake so that we do not miss the opportunities we have each day to share the signs of God's love with one another.

*After the suffering* we should, indeed, *keep awake*. We should keep awake out of relief that Christ joins us in our suffering – not leaving us to muddle through alone. We should keep awake out of enthusiasm for sharing the good news of the word of God. We should keep awake because we are too excited for the return of Christ. We should keep awake, for the Son of Man is coming. He is coming in glory. He is coming to make all things new. He is coming to bring freedom. He is coming to bring forgiveness. He is coming for Michael Brown. He is coming for Darren Wilson. And, he is coming for you and for me.