

“Being Awake to God”
Mark 13:24-37
Sunday, December 3, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Have any of you heard of the TV show, “The Walking Dead?” Most people have. It’s in its 8th season; a TV phenomenon. Even if we don’t like the show, ourselves, we probably know someone who does.

“The Walking Dead” is an apocalyptic story, taken from a comic book series. It’s the story of the Zombie Apocalypse. One morning, the world wakes up, and half the people have suddenly been turned into zombies. The other half struggle to stay alive and struggle not to become zombies themselves. In the midst of those struggles, they face real moral dilemmas – who should live and who should die? Who’s in charge? Who makes the rules? Who gets the food? And the ammo? In the Zombie Apocalypse, do we still treat each other with respect, or is it “anything goes” and “every man for himself?”

It’s a disturbing show; very violent; not for everyone. I love it for those moral dilemmas. The characters are living in an impossible world, and yet somehow they maintain hope. They keep on going. They keep on fighting for what’s important to them – love, the future, another day to watch the beauty of a sunset.

I. The Apocalypse

In today’s gospel reading from Mark, Jesus talks about the Apocalypse. He teaches his disciples about the End Times. Now, of course, Jesus doesn’t mention zombies. Jesus doesn’t talk about a killer virus, or a giant meteor wiping out the earth, or a second Ice Age.

Instead, Jesus talks about reading the signs and being ready for “ ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.”

It’s a strange reading for this time of year, when we’re setting up Christmas trees and shopping for Christmas gifts and baking Christmas cookies and planning Christmas parties.

In the Christian calendar, today is the First Sunday in Advent. And Advent is the first season of the Christian Year. It’s a time when we watch and wait for the celebration of Jesus’ birth – his birthday party. But we also watch and wait for his promised return on that final day. “Adventus” means “to come” in the Latin. We watch for Christ to come – in a manger in Bethlehem; and in power and glory as our victorious King...

Little Benjamin sat down to write a letter to God asking for a baby sister. He started the letter like this: Dear God, I've been a very good boy....

He stopped, thinking, “No, God won't believe that.” He wadded up the paper, threw it away, and started again:

Dear God, Most of the time I've been a good boy... He stopped in the middle of the line, again thinking, “God won't be moved by this,” so into the trash went the wad of paper.

Benjamin went into the bathroom, grabbed a big terrycloth towel off the bar, brought it into the living room and laid it on the couch. Then he went to the fireplace mantle, reached up and brought down a statue of the Madonna, the mother of Jesus, that he had eyed many times. Benjamin placed the statue in the middle of the towel, gently folded over the edges, and placed a rubber band around the whole thing. He brought it to the table, took another piece of paper, and began writing his third letter to God:

Dear God, If you ever want to see your mother again... (source: King Duncan)

Sometimes it’s hard to watch and wait. We want to hurry God along.

II. Before the Apocalypse

Another way to approach this reading from Mark is to note that the passage itself includes references to new birth. Jesus mentions a fig tree, its branches becoming tender as it puts forth its leaves. Summer is near. The new growth is a sign. Signs of new life are everywhere. Jesus gives a message of hope in the middle of his teaching on the end times.

We can take our cue from Jesus. We, too, can be awake to the signs of new life all around us. Jesus is urging us to be attentive. See the signs of his kingdom that are here now. Be prepared. Live with joyous expectation. Be awake to God. Watch and wait for what Jesus is doing now! Today! After all, Jesus is the most important sign of new life there is!

I was once talking with a Methodist friend and we were sharing about the wonders of God. She said, “Sometimes I just have to say ‘Yea, God!’ ” and she clapped her hands. “Yea God!” (hands clapping).

Let’s do that together right now. On the count of 3: 1-2-3: “Yea God!” [repeat as needed]

We don’t have to wait ‘til the end times to praise God, do we? We don’t have to wait ‘til the last days before we wake up and acknowledge who God is. We can praise God today. We can live in relationship with God in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit right now! We can worship the King. We can confess our sins, repent, allow Christ to work in our hearts, and become new people, members of Christ’s kingdom. Today!

It can be hard, especially in the busy holiday season, to remember the reason for the season. We’re frantically shopping and baking and wrapping and writing and sending and inviting... For some of us, we’re busy grieving... Or we’re desperately scraping by to survive; no money for holiday festivities... For some of us, we’re struggling with health issues – a diagnosis we didn’t want to hear from our doctor; creaky joints and organs that don’t work as

well as they used to.

Whether the season is joyful or depressing or stressful, it's definitely distracting. We are distracted, as a society, from knowing God's presence in this holy time.

We don't need to beat ourselves up for being busy and distracted; but we can practice "being awake to God" as we go about our holiday preparations and activities. And if the holidays are passing us by this year -- because of financial challenges or family turmoil or loss or grief or depression or countless other difficult life situations -- we can be awake to God.

We can say "Yea, God!" when we witness one of God's wonders -- a beautiful sunset; the smile of a child; the shining joy of a wrinkled old face singing a Christmas carol; someone letting a stranger go first in line; food being given to the poor. There are so many "Yea God" moments we can celebrate... if we're awake.

Being awake to God may be something new to you. Many folks go through their life rarely if ever thinking of God unless and until they darken the doors of a church.

But we can be awake to God anytime, can't we? We just have to open our spiritual eyes.

I'm going to give you a reminder strategy this morning; a way to stay awake when the sleep-inducing messages of the season distract you. The ushers are going to help me pass out rubber bands. Just wear this rubber band on your wrist. And now and then, during this crazy, distracting season, snap that rubber band against your wrist. Wake up for God. Be awake to God.

Maybe being awake will even lead you to finding a moment to read the Bible or to pray, no matter how busy you are. Being in church is good. Church is a place where we remind each other to stay awake.

Closing.

Cyprian, a famous Bishop of Carthage, wrote these words to a friend 1800 years ago:

“This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas, in the amphitheatres men murdered to please applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world ...”

“An incredibly bad world ...” We may not be living in the Zombie Apocalypse; but it’s easy, in our worst moods, to be pessimistic. We look at the world and see so much violence; so much disregard for human life. We see so much ugliness and banality – it works to strip us of our humanity. We may even feel that the world is beyond the reach and influence of God. But Cyprian was not a pessimist. He goes on to say:

“It is ... an incredibly bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians - and I am one of them.” (quotations source: James W. Robinson)

Remember that you are one of the Christians. Remember, in this busy holiday season, to be awake to God. Remember the joy, the hope, the courage and the strength that comes only from God.

Amen.