

Exploring the Scriptures
Asleep or Awake?

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by Blair Odney

Mark 13:24-37

Of all the times of the year – back to school, summer vacation, spring break – the four weeks leading up to Christmas are, in my mind, the nuttiest times of the year. Carols sing about this being the most wonderful time of the year, and I suppose parts of that are true. If only we were awake to actually experience it.

But that's not what I see. Yesterday in the mall, I watched the mall staff finish putting up the Santa display; vacuuming the carpet, schlepping the pipes and benches, setting up the mini concert stage, moving Christmas trees around, festooned with ornaments, like they were bales of hay, faces expressionless, bodies bent over, seemingly disengaged. I found myself wondering about all the little children who will anticipate a visit to the big guy in the red suit, promising to be good, sharing gift wish lists, looking completely frightened in their photos. I thought about all the hopes and dreams that every little child sees when he or she walks by the big shiny gold ornaments hanging on the tree, or all the little toys in the pretend workshop on display.

Already I saw people yesterday, walking around with lists in their hands: gift lists? Grocery lists? Honey do lists? I have no idea. I just saw the pre-Christmas, driven expression on people's faces as one by one they ticked off whatever it was the list directed them to do. And I wondered if lists represent the purpose of our lives or whether they're just lists of things to do to fill the days to pass the time to say "we did it." When we finally get to Christmas, and the turkey carcass lays half eaten on the platter surrounded by the dirty dishes of the day, and our teenagers are passed out on the couch having eaten too much and stayed up too late the night, preparing to get to the boxing day sale at Future Shop, can we say the Prince of Peace has arrived?

Don't get me wrong, I LOVE Christmas. I still have trouble sleeping on Christmas Eve, excited about what the next day will bring, a remnant from being a kid listening for Santa filling the stockings. I put up the Christmas lights way too early. I used to buy Christmas presents at Bay Day in September, and have them wrapped by Thanksgiving. I listen to Christmas music in August. I make sure the Christmas crafts are made, the gifts are wrapped, the cards are written, the butter tarts are perfect, the turkey is stuffed. And I made sure we got to the Christmas Eve service. I did it before I was a minister, and I do it now. It'll be a little weird this year, but I'm open to all the possibilities that change brings.

In spite of all that, am I any more ready to receive the Prince of Peace. Or am I just as asleep as everyone else, asleep to the possibility that hope and peace and joy and love will actually live in me, because I'm too busy getting stuff done?

The text Judith read sounds really scary. When my evangelical friends used to talk about the second coming of Christ, they would use similar imagery and all it ever did was make me afraid. They'd talk about Jesus coming on a white winged charger, in clouds of glory, with angels all around, in some kind of victorious scooping up all those who called him Lord. Even when Judith read it today, I got a little squeamish remembering those conversations when I was just a budding tenor in the church choir.

It took me a long time to realize that the second coming of Christ will not feature angels, or clouds, or winged horses or trumpets or any of that nonsense. I'm not even really sure what Mark was on about when he put those words into Jesus' mouth. I believe two things. Mark offers them both in this text. Like the business of what happens when we die, the business of Christ coming is in God's hands. It's in the Spirit's wisdom and movement and moment.

And most certainly I believe that Christ comes - the grace, the peace, the hope, the joy, the love of Christ comes in the practice of being awake. And even though Mark uses the idea in a completely different way, he gives us a clue as to how to become awake. Learn the lesson from the fig tree, we hear. As soon as its branch becomes tender puts forth its leaves, you know summer is on the way.

The only way we can consider the fig tree is if we pay attention to it. We have to look at it. Focus, pay attention, "consider" the fig tree. Don't just notice it, trusting it will be there. How do you know its branches are tender without paying attention; without touching them, gently caressing them?

More than at any other time of year we think our busy ness - our hurrying, our lists, our getting it done - is being awake. And that's where we're deluded, I'm deluded. Our addiction to what comes next prevents us from being present to the moment; we are asleep to the moment. And you've heard me say this many times - life will not be found in any story remembered or in any future imagined. I will say the same thing, with different words - Christ's coming - call it a second coming if you need to - will not be in what's next. It is here, now, in this moment, and in every moment.

More than at any other time of the year, the practice of being awake, requires thoughtfulness, intention, looking and not being distracted. Here are some suggestions to practice - every day:

- write in your journal, take 15 minutes every day, to write in a journal, thoughts, feelings, what the weather is doing in the moment that you're writing. Get present.
- sit quietly in your favourite living room chair and stare at your hands as we have done here, for 15 minutes...discipline yourself
- do some centering prayer, meditate, be intentional about yoga
- sit in the mall, and watch the children stare in wonder into the gold balls that adorn the trees as they wait to tell Santa their deepest secrets and remember that the mystery of Christ coming is as simple as this.

That's where we'll find hope, and peace and joy and love. Amen.