

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

<sup>24</sup> “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.”



Welcome to Advent, the season in which we journey closer and closer to the birth of Jesus Christ. This season travels through a story that is very familiar to almost everyone. It is like a favorite movie that we have watched again and again. During these five weeks of December we will worship through the lens of our new series, “Coming Soon.”

Like a favorite story that we have watched many times, we can recite our favorite lines, we can creep to the edge of our seat in anticipation of a familiar happening, we can cringe with the knowledge of what is going to happen next, and we can tear up at those special moments that pull on our heartstrings year after year. Each Advent we travel with John the Baptist and with Mary and Elizabeth and Joseph and with the angels and the shepherds and the drummer boy and with Simeon and Anna and Herod and with the wise men. It is quite the cast of characters, isn't it? As we begin this journey together, let us begin with a word of prayer...



Please turn with me to Mark 13 as we begin this Advent journey. In this movie-style series, today's passage would be like a movie trailer in our modern movie age. Close your eyes

and imagine the camera panning wider, taking in the grand scene described by Jesus in Mark 13. As these words come to a close, imagine the camera slowly closing in on the solitary fig tree. Close your eyes and imagine this grand scene that foreshadows a day yet to come. *"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... Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory... 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."* These first half of these words come the prophet Isaiah, in chapters 13 and 34. They are well-known words concerning the coming Messiah. Now, focus on that fig tree in your mind's eye. It has some new branches, and it has tender shoots and leaves just beginning to form.

As you open your eyes, in verse 28 we see Jesus now standing by the fig tree, ready to begin a new lesson. He reminds us that this new growth means that summer is near. In a similar way, Jesus notes, when we see the sun darkened and stars falling from heaven, then we will know that the return of the Son of Man is upon us. Riding upon the clouds in “*great power*” Jesus will send out the angels to harvest the earth. The elect, the chosen, the saved – they will be gathered from all over the earth and from the end of heaven. This great multitude will be the countless sea of faces dressed in white robes from a few weeks ago. Is this something like what you portrayed in your mind’s eye?



These words found in Mark 13 are, at first glance, perhaps a unique place to begin this Advent journey towards Christmas. This season of peace, hope, joy, and love and hot chocolate and joyful Christmas carols is a far cry from the doom and gloom images created by Jesus here in Mark’s gospel. Continuing on in the passage, I can see Jesus examining the fig tree as he shares these next words: “*But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*



*Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*” As we hear these words, one part of me thinks that it is no wonder that the early followers of Jesus would believe that his return was imminent, certainly well within the bounds of their lifetimes.

Jesus is clear, though, about the fact that only God knows the time. Within these words about not knowing the day or hour is a warning against speculating about when Jesus might return. There are two dangers in speculation. One is that we are attempting to speak with “knowledge” – in an area that we really know nothing about.

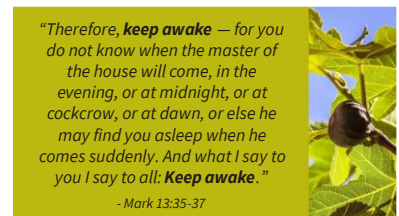
The second danger is that “knowing” a date could affect the way we live in the time that we have left. Two weeks ago I posed the question about whether or not we would live any differently if we knew the date of our last day here on earth. To think that we knew the day and hour of Christ’s return would also likely skew how we live out whatever remaining days we had left.



In these verses, the fig tree is about to blossom into new life. Yet, from our vantage point, we can hear these words for more of what Jesus meant them to be. These words are a call

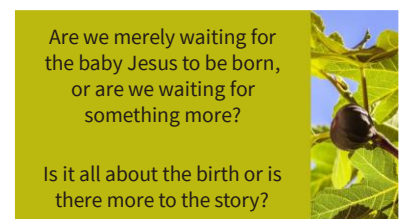
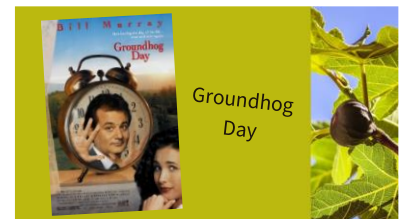
to “*keep alert*” as we await the signs of the return of Jesus. In the waiting we are called to keep alert or to be “on guard.” This would involve keeping our hearts and minds focused on the will and ways of God. In the waiting we are called to also be alert. This would involve being alert to all that can distract and sidetrack us. Some translations also tell us to pray. Prayer, of course, would keep us aligned with God and would also help us in our battle with temptation and sin.

In the grand timeline of God, Christ's return is almost here. We recognize that God's time is not our time. In this parable, I believe that Jesus is speaking from this perspective. As we turn to verse 34, Jesus speaks of a door keeper, the one set in place to watch for the master’s return. Continuing on, Jesus touches on the unknown nature of his return. Here he warns, “*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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.*” Here Jesus is implying that there will be no sign or warning proceeding his return.



By using the four customary time units of the watches of the night, Jesus is saying that he could return at nine or midnight or 3 AM or 6 AM or... at any time really. Jesus' emphasis here is that our first and most important task is to "keep awake." We are to always be ready for the moment of Christ's return, even if we do not know the day or hour. The call is to live faithfully and obediently each moment of each day. The parable of the fig tree also calls us to a sense of urgency in the here and now. In this sense, there is no room for complacency or for patience. The call is instead to expectation and to anticipation. Theresa Cho asks this question about our approach to the Advent season: Are we merely waiting for the baby Jesus to be born, or are we waiting for something more? Put another way, is it all about the birth or is there more to the story?

We can fall into the "here we go again" of the Advent season. Same song from Mary, same angelic visits, same stable, same angels in the fields by night. It is like a movie that we have watched dozens of times. This reminded me of one of my favorite movies – Groundhog Day. The premise of the movie is that Bill Murray's character has the ability to do over a day again and again. Each day he gets just so far in pursuing his love interest, but then he messes things up. Each day in the movie is a repeat – he gets a little further along in his pursuit, fixing his last mistake each new day. Soon one gets the "here we go again" feeling and it starts happening over and over. One begins to anticipate what will change and what his next step will be. One starts to eagerly await what comes next in the movie this latest time around. With this frame of reference, I again to return to the last faith questions: Are we merely waiting for the baby Jesus to be born, or are we waiting for something more? Is it all about the birth or is there more to the story?



As a means to begin to answer these questions, let us turn to Luke 3 and to week 1 of our Advent study, All the Good. Turn

with me to Luke 3 as I read verses 1-8a: <sup>1</sup> *In the fifteenth year*

*of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was*

*governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...* <sup>2</sup> *during the high priesthood of Annas*

*and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* <sup>3</sup> *He went*

*into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the*

*forgiveness of sins,* <sup>4</sup> *as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The*

*voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths*

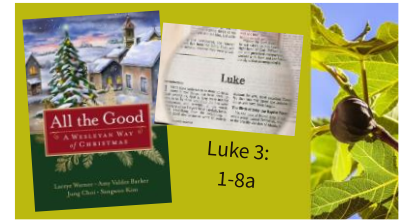
*straight.* <sup>5</sup> *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and*

*the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;* <sup>6</sup> *and all flesh shall*

*see the salvation of God.’”* <sup>7</sup> *John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him,*

*“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”* <sup>8</sup> *Bear fruits worthy*

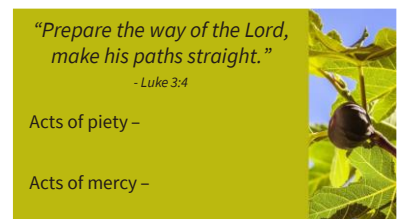
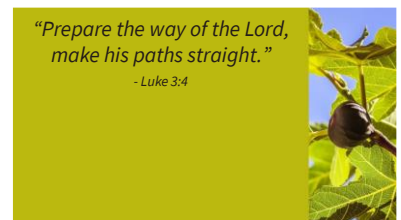
*of repentance.”*



The season of Advent is one that seeks to help us recognize our need for God. Leading into our gospel text, God calls John the Baptist to announce the approaching arrival of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Through John the Baptist, God was expressing a desire to have a personal relationship with all of us. John called people into this relationship through “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” The season of Advent provides a time and space to prepare to receive a Christ child that will one day “overcome the separation that sin continues to inflict on our world” (All the Good, page 19.) Living into this time and space by staying awake and being alert to God’s presence in our lives, as Jesus called us to in the parable of the fig tree, is part of our Advent preparation.

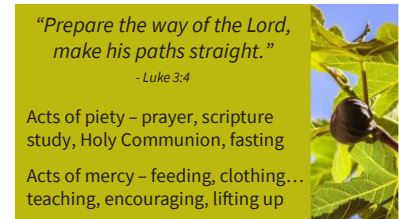
Since almost the beginning of humanity, sin has been present in our human condition. Since the day that Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, sin has inflicted harm and has created separation from God and from one another. Humanity's ongoing battle with sin and God's never-ending gift of grace has been a cycle often repeated in the Biblical account. From Noah to David and right on down to you and me, we sin, and God offers grace and forgiveness and restoration and reconciliation. Advent represents, according to author Lacey Warner, "the climax of this story" (page 17.) The great story of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone is a necessary part of Advent. It is the "why" in the birth story. At just the right time, God sent Jesus into the world to embody God's love for all of creation. This goes back to our earlier question: Is it all about the birth or is there more to the story?

Echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist declared the purpose of his ministry to be to *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."* A baptism of repentance was the first step on this journey of preparation. For John Wesley, it was prevenient grace that led one to take this first step towards entering a relationship with God. It is from within this relationship that we are then led to respond to God's grace. For John Wesley and for the earliest Methodists, this response came in two ways, collectively known as the "means of grace." One way that we respond to God's grace is our works of piety and the other way is in our works of mercy. These two expressions of responding to God's grace reflected Wesley's personal practice and his theological understanding of a personal and social holiness.



Acts of piety are those disciplines and habits that we use to keep us connected to God and growing in our love of God. Acts of mercy are those things that we most often do outside the walls of the church that help us to grow in our love of God and neighbor.

Acts of piety are the personal practices of faith. They include prayer, scripture study, Holy Communion, and fasting. These acts of piety help the Christian to develop a personal holiness

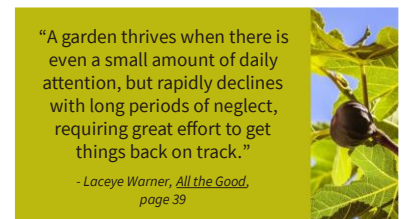


by deepening our relationship with God. Acts of mercy would include the things we talked about last week as we wrestled with Matthew 25. Acts of mercy include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting and caring for the sick, the orphans and widows, and the prisoners. Acts of mercy would also include teaching others about Jesus, encouraging those who are struggling, and lifting up those dealing with temptation. These acts of mercy help the Christian to develop our social holiness as we share the love of God with our neighbors.

These Christian disciplines of piety and mercy most often consist of simple daily practices. Yes, they can be large efforts, such as Wesley's effort to build, staff, and operate the Kingswood School, a public school built to educate the children of the miners that worked in the Kingswood coal mines. But mostly they are lived out in simple quiet times and in regular worship, in caring for our elderly neighbor or by walking alongside a brother or sister in Christ during a difficult stretch in their life. For Wesley, the use or application of the means of grace was not to accomplish a task or to check off a box. Acts of piety and acts of mercy are ways that we can open ourselves to receive God's grace and to be formed more into Christ's likeness.

“All the Good” co-author Lacey Warner closes chapter one with a wonderful analogy for practicing the means of grace. She writes, “Practicing the means of grace is similar to tending a garden” (page 37.) She notes that the gardener – that’s us – participates in the planting, in the watering, in the weeding, and in the harvest. However, as she also notes, the miracle of the seed, the growth, and the fruit – that comes from God alone.

And, like a garden, Warner points out that practicing the means of grace requires balance and discipline. Just as a garden requires the proper balance of sunlight, water, nutrients and so on, so too does our faith require the proper balance of acts of piety and acts of mercy. And just as a healthy garden requires a disciplined hand, our faith also requires consistent and regular attention. In closing this analogy, Warner reminds us, “A garden thrives when there is even a small amount of daily attention, but rapidly declines with long periods of neglect, requiring great effort to get things back on track” (page 39.)



As we consider the gospel’s call to stay tuned, to keep alert and to be awake so that we are prepared for the coming of the Lord – whether at Christmas, or when we draw our last breath, or during his final return – may we commit this Advent season to the regular and disciplined practices of our faith, daily growing in love of God and in love of neighbor. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As we start this season of Advent, how do you sense God calling out to you, ‘Ready or not, here I come!’? ...And how will you respond?
- 2) *Pray*. As you consider your prayer life during Advent, how might you incorporate ways and practices to “*stay awake*” and to “*keep alert*?”
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 3:1-12. What elements does Matthew’s text add to today’s text from Luke 3:1-8a? What “*good fruit*” might you bear this week?