

## **“Keep Awake”: Hope Comes Unexpectedly**

*A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church*

Mark 13:24-37

November 29, 2020

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In Washington Irving’s story *Rip Van Winkle*, which takes place in the years before the Revolutionary War, a man named Rip lives in a village with his family at the foot of the Catskill Mountains in New York. One day, Rip goes with his dog on a hike up into the mountains when he finds a group of men drinking and playing games in the woods. Rip stops to join them for a drink until after awhile he becomes very sleepy, so much so that he can hardly keep his eyes open any longer. Finally, he finds a place to rest for the night with his dog and falls fast asleep.

When Rip wakes up, he is startled and grabs for his gun, but he is surprised to see that it has rusted and rotted so badly overnight that it just falls apart in his hands. Then, he looks down in shock to see a long white beard flowing all the way down his chest. And soon, he realizes that his beloved dog is nowhere to be found. Rip’s whole body aches, and his bones creak and crack as he slowly makes his way down the mountain, which he had come up so easily the day before. And he returns to his home village, only to discover so many new houses and buildings that seemed to have sprung up overnight. He hardly recognizes the town as his own.

When he finds his own house, he quickly realizes that it’s a complete disaster. The foundation is cracking, and weeds have grown up all around it, but even worse is that he can’t find his wife or children anywhere. Rip begins to walk around town, trying to figure out what in the world is going on, when he realizes that he doesn’t recognize a single person. Finally, one of the townspeople sees him from across the street and gets a puzzled look on his face. He calls out, “Hey! Isn’t that the long-lost Rip Van Winkle?” Rip finally discovers that he has been asleep in the mountains for twenty years while life has completely passed him by.

I don’t know about you, but when I hear the story of Rip Van Winkle during a year like this one, I think....huh. I don’t know that I want to sleep through 20 years of my life, but maybe it wouldn’t be half bad to have slept through 2020 and to wake up on the other side of all this.

And yet, this weekend marks the beginning of Advent - the season in which we wait in anticipation for God to do something completely unexpected in our midst. And our job, as Jesus says in Mark 13, is to “keep awake,” because we do not know how or when or in what way God will break into our world.

I have preached this text from Mark’s Gospel at Advent before – usually encouraging us not to let time pass us by in the hustle and bustle of the season. Even in the frenzy of activities and events and end-of-semester assignments and Christmas shopping and concerts and festivities – I believe this text challenges us to “keep awake” to each moment God has entrusted to us.

And yet this is going to be an Advent like none that you and I have ever experienced before. We're not going to parties and events every night of the week, we're going to be at home by ourselves a lot more than usual, and we're missing so many of our beloved traditions that help to keep us grounded in the midst of this season – like Hanging of the Green, which would have been tonight here at Highland.

For many of us, we are just trying to make it through a painful season right now. The holidays tell us that this is supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year, but the reality is that this doesn't feel true for many people in our world right now. A lot of us just want to make it to the end of 2020 and say that we survived! And perhaps the easiest way for us to make it through the holidays *this year* is simply to turn it all off. To go to sleep.

But as I was reflecting on this text this week, I realized that Jesus was actually sharing these words with the disciples to prepare them for a time of crisis. In fact, if we look at the entire chapter of Mark 13, Jesus is predicting that one day, the temple will be destroyed. Life won't always be as it is right now, Jesus tells them. And to be a follower of Jesus will be a very risky – very countercultural – and very dangerous thing.

And yet, even when life gets overwhelmingly hard, and even when Jesus is no longer right there by their side, even when it feels like everything is falling apart, their job, perhaps more than ever before, is to keep awake.

To be on the lookout for the fig trees, which remind them that summer is around the corner. To constantly search the horizon for hope, because it can spring up in even the most unexpected places.

One scholar reads Jesus words here to mean that “In this moment of crisis, just as servants keep at their tasks before the householder returns, so should Jesus' followers sleep with one eye open to the new thing God is doing.”

And so, Highland family, what would it look like for us to spend this unique season of Advent doing something like that?

I'm not saying this is going to be easy. The reality is that waking up requires some vulnerability on our part. It means that we are just as alive to moments of sadness and pain and loss as we are to moments of joy. You see, a weary world can't rejoice without somehow waking up to what is going on around us.

I discovered this week that Martin Luther King Jr. actually loved the story of Rip Van Winkle and used it often in sermons and speeches. King liked to point out that, “there is another part in the story which is almost always completely overlooked.”

You see, when Rip goes up the mountain, he notices a sign in the local tavern with a picture of King George III. But when he comes back down the mountain, he stops by that same tavern and notices that the picture has been replaced with one of a man Rip doesn't even recognize named George Washington.

King once said in a sermon that "The most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that he slept for twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountains, a revolution was taking place in the world that would alter the face of human history. Yet Rip knew nothing about it; he was asleep."<sup>1</sup>

Highland, what if this Advent, in the year 2020, we intentionally chose to wake up to the revolution that is taking place around us? What if we chose to come awake not only to our own lives – but to the lives of our neighbors? To wake up to the injustices that are happening all around us – even to things we would much rather not see and to the people whose stories it would be so much easier not to know. Because especially if and when we are in places of privilege, I believe this is when God is calling us to wake up the most.

After all, isn't that exactly what Jesus wanted the disciples do? Just verses after today's text in Mark, Jesus begs them to stay awake in the garden – to keep watch while he prays. But like Rip Van Winkle in the Catskill Mountains, they can hardly keep their eyes open. They actually fall asleep on Jesus not once, not even twice, but three times that night.

As one scholar points out, "We all live in a Gethsemane moment in human history, [and] we must not be caught napping like the first disciples were when the crucial moment arrived."<sup>2</sup>

And friends, I believe the crucial moment is here – it's now. The question is – are you and I awake enough to notice it, and even more so, to step in and to be part of it?

I know that these are dark and difficult days. It almost seems odd to begin the season of Advent in a world that honestly feels more like Good Friday than it does like Christmas right now. But as activist Valerie Kaur said a few years ago in a Night Watch service, "My faith dares me to ask: What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?"<sup>3</sup>

And if that's the case – then we must not fall asleep in the midst of our weary labor, church.

Even in these difficult days of 2020, Advent reminds us not to give up hope, because God is about to birth something new and unexpected within us.

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<sup>1</sup> "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>

<sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Matthew: A Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*

<sup>3</sup> <https://valariekaur.com/2017/01/watch-night-speech-breathe-push/>

Advent invites us to wake up to the mystery –  
To wake up to the surprise –  
To wake up to the unexpected –  
To wake up to the revolutionary thing that God is getting ready to do in us and among us –  
even while it is still dark.

After all, as Anne Lamott says, “Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.”

The question is, will we show up? Will we wake up? Because if so, maybe God will surprise us with a stubborn hope, even in the year 2020, even while it is still dark.

**Advent Blessing:**

Friends, we have prepared our spaces for the Advent journey that is ahead of us.  
Because we believe that neither height nor depth,  
Nor things present nor things to come,  
Neither death nor life,  
Nor anything in all creation - not even *a pandemic*

Can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord –  
This love that is coming to be with us and with our weary world.

And so may we keep watch, Highland family,  
for the hope that comes to us unexpectedly this Advent season.  
Amen.