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 1 Advent B: Mark 13:24-37  
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*Getting Ready*

My Granny and Grampa were married before Grampa went off to serve in World War II as a pilot. He flew a spitfire in missions over North Africa. He came back safely and taught new pilots until he went to seminary and was ordained as a Lutheran pastor. When I was about twelve, Granny was rearranging some boxes in a closet in their bedroom. She took one down off a high shelf and handed it to me while she stepped down off the step ladder. “This one has some fun things you might like to see,” she said. “They’re old fashioned, but you might like to see them. They’re from when Grampa was away in the war.” As she opened the box and started pulling out items wrapped in tissue paper, she said, of course it was hard waiting for Grampa’s visits, for his leave time. There were long stretches of time when we couldn’t see each other. And of course we couldn’t wait for the end of the war, when everyone would come home for good.” The box she opened before me was filled with hats, carefully wrapped in tissue paper, lovely ladies’ hats from the early 1940’s. Before each time Grampa came home, Granny bought herself a new hat to wear for his arrival, part of her preparations for seeing her beloved.

Of course, shopping for hats was not the only thing Granny did while Grampa was away. She had a life and responsibilities and these could not be put on hold just because her husband was away. She raised their daughter, my mother. She worked as a nurse. She held vigil with other Air Force wives. They made a garden and she harvested and canned and preserved and pickled. She was a woman of faith and attended church and read her Bible and prayed. She prayed for the safe return of the men and well-being of the women and men who worked for the war effort and she prayed for peace and the well-being of every one at home. She kept busy with worthy things because that’s what being a person of faith meant. And each time she heard that Grampa would be coming home, she bought a new hat—“nothing

extravagant,” she assured me, just something a little special to show that she missed him and had made some effort to prepare for his return, his coming home.

The church calendar has once again turned to the beginning of the year. Green, the color of growth, has changed to blue, the color of hope. The first Advent candle has been lighted. We enter once again into this season of preparation, expectation, and hope. Advent means “coming.” We prepare to celebrate the coming of God in Christ Jesus as a baby. We recommit ourselves to be aware of Christ coming among us every day, in word and sacrament, in neighbor and stranger. We claim our hope that Christ will come again with power and glory, at an unknown time and life as we know it will come to an end. Jesus says that when this happens even the most constant things of life on earth—sun, and moon, and stars—will be changed, no longer necessary. The time that they mark will be over. God will gather all God’s people and God’s heavenly reign will begin in completeness.

The world as Jesus describes it throughout his teaching is a world where every moment is pregnant with the possibility of meeting God, serving God, worshipping God. So, Jesus says, whether keeping alert to the coming of God every day, or the final coming, keep awake.

Jesus is not calling us to be sleep-deprived. He is not inviting us to an anxious, high-caffeinated string of all-nighters. Pilots need rest so they’re ready for whatever is over the next horizon. Sleepy drivers pose a danger to themselves and others. Jesus’ call to wakefulness and alertness goes hand in hand with the trust in God we show when we place all our cares and concerns into the hands of God and get a good night’s sleep so we are ready to work and play and worship and serve in the morning.

But, none of us knows when the end will come – for us, for those we love, for the world. And sometimes, rather than trust, we fall into the trap of numbing ourselves because, frankly, it’s easier than feeling afraid or bored or helpless. But Jesus says, Keep alert. Don’t keep hitting the snooze button or pulling the blankets up over your face. Don’t sleep walk through life. Wake up!

Wake up to whatever life is bringing you – as a person, as a community. Wake up. Wake up to pain, if that is what you need to wake up

to, because you cannot be healed until you admit you are hurting. Wake up to the present you are so angry about because it is not what you asked for. Wake up to the suffering of others around you because all of us are connected. Wake up to the love you will not accept because you are worried you will lose it. Wake up to the fact that you are not the master here, just the servant left in charge.

Wake up because we have a job to do. Jesus tells us this parable about what we do as we wait and watch and stay awake, “It’s 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 watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come . . . or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.”

What is Jesus telling us? First, time is in God’s hands. We don’t know when, so don’t be anxious. And don’t waste your time counting down or making predictions. Live faithfully. Live in such a way that you would be happy for the master to come home unexpectedly and find you doing exactly what you’re doing. If you’re not doing something you can be proud of, cut it out. Live in the present faithfully, with trust and with hope, and God will take care of the future.

Christ is present now. But not in the way he will be some day. And just because we don’t know God’s timetable does not mean we don’t have any responsibility in the meanwhile. In the parable the man has gone away, leaving his servants with their work.

Have you ever been left in charge when someone goes away? I think it was Barbara Brown Taylor in a sermon<sup>1</sup> who pointed out: then you know the choice you have when the door closes behind the master and you hear the tires of his car crunch across the gravel as he turns out of the driveway and the sounds of the car engine fade away. The whole house seems like it’s yours and you have a choice: you can do what you like. You can leave your clothes all over the floor if you want. You can eat ice cream for every meal. Or, you can see how much you can accomplish as you keep an ear out for the sound of the owner’s return.

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<sup>1</sup> I haven’t been able to locate the particular sermon, but I recall reading a sermon, I think by Barbara Brown Taylor, in which she describes the choices one faces being left in charge when someone goes away.

The choice is yours. But whatever you choose, the work you were given to do when the master left really is yours to do. If you don't water the plants, they'll turn brown and die. If you don't ever vacuum, dust bunnies will take over. If you never wash the dishes, they won't clean themselves. If you don't really believe that you are in charge, then maybe none of this will bother you. But this is still where you live and the master is still coming home someday. You can take really long naps and let the laundry pile up, or you can stay awake and watch and do the work he has given you to do.

Our watching for the master's return is not an anxious watching, not a last minute scrambling to corral the dust bunnies into a corner and hide the laundry in a closet. It's also not an anxious watching that keeps us running to the door every time we hear a car pass, or a bored watching that keeps us sighing and staring out the window all day long.

We are to stay awake and do the work given us to do. We are to care for one another, loving one another the way he loved us. We are to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and share with those in any need. We are to pray and prepare and do everything that we can to care for the master's things—everything that really is just on loan to us here.

It has been a long time since Christ came as a baby, and we have been waiting a long time for him to come again in glory and set all things right. But how long we wait is not the issue. How awake we are to his coming is. Our job is to do the work he has entrusted to us, to stay alert, to resist numbness, to stay alive to everything life brings us, so we do not miss Christ when Christ comes, whenever Christ comes, in all the ways Christ comes.

Amen.