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The Federated Church of Hyannis
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

WIDE AWAKE CHRISTIANS

Mark 13:24-37

In one of his Lake Wobegon stories, Garrison Keillor tells about a Sunday morning in Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church. The sermon had been droning on far too long, and Clarence Bunsen had checked out early. He realized it was almost time for the offering, so he quietly reached for his wallet. Upon opening his wallet, Clarence discovered he had no cash. He took out his pen and hid the checkbook in the middle of his Bible, next to one of the Psalms. He began to scratch out a check for thirty dollars, because he almost had a heart attack that week, and because somebody in the church would count the offering and he wanted them to see he gave thirty dollars.

He tried not to be obvious, but a lady to his right saw him. Clarence could tell she thought he was writing in the pew Bible, so he did not look at what he was doing. She gave him a funny stare, and turned back to the sermon. Clarence tried to quietly rip the check out of the checkbook, with limited success, still not looking at what he was doing so the lady in the pew would not know he had written out a check in church.

The offering plate came by, and Clarence proudly put in the check, only to realize a moment too late that he had just written a check for three hundred dollars. He accidentally wrote three-zero-zero on two different lines when he wasn't looking. What could he do? On the one hand, he couldn't go downstairs after church and find the deacons counting the collection and say, "Fellows, there's been a mistake. I gave more than I really wanted to."

On the other hand, he gave all he had in the checking account and a little more. Perhaps he and his family would have to eat beans and oatmeal for the rest of the month, Clarence thought, even though the contribution was going to a good place. One thing was for sure, notes Keillor. In that moment, Clarence felt fully alive for the first time all day.

There are those moments in life when, for better or for worse, we feel alive and wide awake in ways we have never felt before. I remember the time in my senior year in college when I lay in my bed sound asleep. My roommate

poked me and said, “John, don’t be alarmed but the dorm is on fire.” That may be the quickest I ever became wide awake.

It is the call from the supervisor at the nursing home about a loved one saying that we need to get right over there. We can be painfully awake, alert in the presence of death. Are we ever more aware of our self and our breathing and perspiration and what we look like and everyone and everything around us than at that time we walk down the aisle or the time we stand there with everyone else looking at the one walking toward us. It is one of the greatest privileges of ministry to stand and look into the eyes of those looking at one another in great joy and abject terror to exchange vows.

Are we ever more aware of life then when this announcement is made? “Hi honey, how was your day?” “I have been exhausted all day. The drive to work was a hassle both ways. I had a huge pile of work put on my desk. Then I had to sit through the most boring meeting in all of history.” “Are you going to make me talk about my day?” “What about your day?” “Shopping, the beauty parlor, yard work, laundry, ironing, a doctor’s appointment. And know how you said someday you would like kids? Congratulations. We are having of twins.” For the first time all day you are wide awake.

It is why we hold baptism as sacred, because it marks the gift of life that we dedicate to God. It is why we hold marriage not as a civil ceremony but a sacred ceremony. It is why death is not just marking the end of a life but the beginning of a new life with God. It is why Christians gather in worship to mark these most significant moments in life.

Few of us can remember a time we have been more alert to our personal, national and global economic situation. Jesus’ words captured the concerns of those in the first century. We might use imagery of a collapsing stock market, nuclear holocaust, terrorist attacks, and all those things that wake us up in the middle of the night.

Jesus said to look at the signs of the times. And what do we see? How well are they understood? For most of the past 20 centuries there are people who have looked at the events of their time and thought they could then predict the future like we can predict the weather. If we knew just when Jesus was coming we would pencil him into our schedules because we get really busy

at Christmas time. It is like a man on Wall Street wearing a sandwich board sign reading: The end of the world is coming – start plea bargaining.”

Most just are not looking for signs of Jesus’ return. A woman and her daughter were out Christmas shopping on the day after Thanksgiving. Just as everyone had predicted, the crowds were awful. They had to skip lunch because they were on a tight schedule. Toward the end of the day, Mom was hungry, tired, and her feet were killing her. She was getting more and more irritable.

As they left the last store, she turned to her daughter and asked, “Did you see the nasty look that salesman gave me?” Her daughter answered, “He didn’t give it to you, Mom. You had it when you went in.” More in our society are looking for bargains than are looking for Jesus to return. And there are those who are looking who claim exclusive knowledge Jesus said only the Father knows.

In a Peanuts cartoon strip, Peppermint Patty went away to a summer camp, which happened to be operated by a religious group that specialized in end time predictions. There she heard that Jesus is coming soon – perhaps even tomorrow, or next week for sure. This old world is coming to an end, and you’d better get ready. Realizing that her father is probably not ready, she went to the office to telephone him with the ominous news.

But the phone was busy and she stood in line for her turn to place a call. While standing there, she noticed a display on the wall, with architect’s drawings of the camp’s five-year plan for new buildings. So she got out of line, walked away muttering, “The world may be coming to an end tomorrow, but I wasn’t born yesterday!” “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

There is an Hasidic story about a rabbi who crossed a village square every morning on his way to the temple to pray. One morning, a large Russian Cossack soldier, who happened to be in a vile mood, accosted him, saying, “Hey, rabbi, where are you going?” The rabbi simply said, “I don’t know.” This infuriated the soldier. “What do you mean, you don’t know? Every morning for twenty-five years you have crossed the village square and gone to the temple to pray. Don’t fool with me. Why are you telling me you don’t know?” He grabbed the old rabbi by the coat and dragged him off to

jail. Just as the Cossack was about to push him into the cell, the rabbi turned to him, and softly said, “You see, I didn’t know.”

Jesus said, “For you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow.” These are the four Roman nightly watches: evening watch, 6:00 - 9:00 PM, midnight watch, 9:00 – midnight, cockcrow watch, midnight - 3:00 AM, and dawn watch, 3:00 - 6:00 AM. In the Roman army, a guard could be executed for falling asleep on guard duty. While that sounds harsh, it reflected a harsh reality. Readiness is a matter of life and death. If a guard falls asleep, the enemy might breach the defenses and kill those whom the guard was charged to protect.

I remember my freshman year in college being given advice on how to study for finals. I was advised to start studying about 9 at night and just read through until the morning, shower, have breakfast and you are sure to do fine on the exam. I was already a marginal student and you might guess the result. I did not get off of academic probation until I was a junior.

I don’t blame it entirely on trying to pull an all-nighter, but I did learn the value of being awake when the time comes for the test. Struggling to stay awake for a test is a recipe for failure. It means failure in academic pursuit and failure in faith. Remember how the night of his betrayal Jesus asked the disciples to stay awake with him and three times he returned to find them asleep? And when danger came they were not prepared and ran like scared rabbits.

How could the biggest banks in the world suddenly be threatened with insolvency? A lot of people were just sleep walking. How many automobile accidents are attributed to a distracted driver? We know the curse of the cell phone. But you can also see people who, while driving, are shaving or putting on make-up. One man I saw on the highway was reading the Bible while he drove slowly in the passing lane. We need wide awake drivers.

It can be like teams who are ahead and hope to simply run out the clock to win. So they stop playing the game and they start watching the clock only to discover that they have fallen behind. Yogi Berra described the uncertainty of any athletic contest with the famous comment: “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.” Until that last fly ball is caught or strike is called or ground ball is thrown to

first base and the last out is made, the game is not over. Anything can happen.

We in New England know the excitement there can be when it is over. For sports fans this has been a great location. In less than a decade we have celebrated 3 Super Bowls, 2 World Series, a Celtic's world championship and even the Bruins are in first place. But any successful coach can tell you when the season is over the work begins to prepare for the new season.

In this Advent season we find comfort in what is familiar – the carols and lessons, the lights and decorations. But it is the unfamiliar that keeps us awake, that keeps us alert. When I was a volunteer on an ambulance squad, this was something I learned. Sometimes you need to irritate people to keep them awake so they would not fall asleep and go into shock and die. Sometimes we need to irritate people to keep them awake to tell us what happened and where they are hurt. A certain degree of irritation is even good in a church. If we are always comfortable and everything is always familiar we become lulled into sleep, we move from wide awake Christians to sound asleep Christians.

Jesus instructed his followers to keep awake and to keep alert. There are a lot of things that can distract us – earthquake, wind, and fire. But we need to keep awake and alert for Christ to come to us in whatever way he will – the face of one of his needy ones or a cosmic event or a whisper to us in a time of quiet. We continue to prepare as a church should prepare with carols and Christmas readings, with candle lighting and prayer, and with giving gifts to people we do not know and who will never know we are the one to give the gift.

All we really know about the future is that the future is in the loving hands of a loving God. “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” Psalm 27:14