

For Those Who Dream: Keep Awake (Hope)
Mark 13:24-37

Before there were street lamps, steam engines, telegraphs, and coffee houses, there was first sleep and second sleep.

A couple of hours after dusk, people would settle in their beds for a first sleep of around four hours.... And then, waking, refreshed, they would often spend an hour or two meditating, praying, doing needlework, smoking, studying. Notes from this time capture how people used the time between first and second sleep to even visit neighbors. This hour in the middle of the night was a kind of bridge before falling back into a second sleep of a few more hours.

In the 1990s, a sleep researcher conducted an experiment that removed all artificial light from participants. After a time of adjustment, he found that they too went back to this cycle of sleeping relatively soon after dusk for a few hours, waking up, and sleeping again.

In our world, though, waking at 3 a.m. doesn't generally come with a feeling of renewal and opportunity so much as dread and clock-watching. We don't often fall asleep "a couple of hours after dusk" in the winter, and wake up refreshed for an hour of delight before going back to sleep again.

But what if we could rediscover some of this pre-industrial, waking-dream time between sleeps? Perhaps not literally but figuratively....

This Advent, our theme is "For Those Who Dream."

And on this first Sunday of Advent, we are told to "keep awake."

But what does it really mean to dream as people of faith, and to keep awake?

We are told every day by corporations and media to dream for physical things, for tangible goods.

And we are told to keep awake so that we can be more productive. We can do more work, have more time for self-improvement.

But how could this waking dream call into another reality, into something more like what God imagines with us?

In his book *The Secret History of Dreaming*, Robert Moss describes how “humanity rehearses for new phases in its development through dreaming.”

Think of ideas that are “in the air.”

Think of science fiction writers that created a world that turned out to be true decades later.

Think of artists and visionaries.

How do dreams let us see ahead?

In the western world, we primarily think of dreaming as an experience while sleeping. Yet other cultures interpret dreaming as “keeping awake.”

In ancient Egyptian language, the word for dream literally means “awakening.” So dreaming and keeping awake actually are partners in this.

Let’s walk back through this Scripture that we heard Jennifer read....

We hear that the time before the Son of Man returns will be marked with the sun going dark,

with stars falling out of the sky, with angels being deployed to all corners of the earth.

And then, after this apocalyptic scene, we are told.... Look at the fig tree.

Seriously?

You’re telling me that this event is imminent and the sky will be torn apart and after all that, we should be looking at the buds on a fig tree?

Setting this passage in context, this was originally written to a Jewish people whose Temple had been destroyed.... Who had no place to gather, and whose very existence was threatened by those with power who wanted to destroy them.... This parable of the fig tree is among the portions of Scripture that scholars think Jesus likely never said. These verses were composed at a time when people expected Jesus’ imminent return. It could be next week, or the week after! It could be a couple of months away. But it was CLOSE. He was going to return and save the people from the challenges of their world.

And they needed the closeness of this return into their troubled time.

The parable of the fig tree, even if Jesus never said it, can still be true.

It can be true whether or not it ever happened, because it points to a larger meaning.

Consider this... We had Jesus living on earth in the past, holding lambs, letting his feet be perfumed, getting dipped in the river by John the Baptist, crying alone in the garden, breaking bread with his disciples, falling three times on his way to the cross....

And yet, we stand here in Advent in a posture of waiting, waiting for him to come again.... To be born again as a baby in an unlikely place in a time of death and danger....

Theologians refer to this as the “already and the not yet” of Jesus’ coming. The already and not yet of the world that is and that could yet be. Jesus has already lived, healed with his hands, let mud be a miracle, turned water into wine, danced all night at a wedding feast. And yet also, he is not yet here again, not yet born with us. He has already preached, and taught about love, and led with imagination, and shared his own dreaming. And yet the world is not restored to God’s dream of wholeness. We sit with Mary now in her pregnancy. This is the already and the not yet. Jesus has been born before, and yet still, we wait for another world.

We know too well the not-yet of Jesus’ return in this aching world. We know that this week, a week where Wall Street hit a new high, also has had a new high in COVID hospitalizations. Records that have been set in cases are being shattered again, with no off switch. In nine states, 1 in 1,000 people have died due to COVID. We read about the relentless fatigue that doctors and nurses are feeling, the disbelief and pain when people continue to insist that COVID isn’t real even as they die of it. And right now, according to the Washington Post, one in six families in this country is experiencing hunger now. At least 30 states are reporting an increase in opioid overdoses. The people of the Honduras have been devastated twice by hurricanes on top of pandemic, the vast swath of need and want in the nation.

Many of us have read about this from a safe distance.
We've read about this from work-from-home, from virtual learning, from our own homes where we do not have to ask how we will feed our family or stay warm when temperatures fall.
Oh we know that Jesus has not yet returned to this earth.
We know that God's dream is not yet realized here.
Advent comes to us in shadows and breaking apart the sky to remind us.

So what does this have to do with the fig tree, and why are we supposed to gaze on it?

Shouldn't we look to the skies being torn apart?
Well, we won't be able to help but notice if that happens.
I'm pretty sure that every one of us, whatever we were doing at the time, wouldn't miss the sun going dark, the moon withholding its light, and angels on our streets picking up our newspapers and drinking coffee in our neighborhoods.
That's the easy part.
But in this time, we shouldn't miss the fig tree.
We should keep awake to it.
What does this mean?
I hear this as the call to not miss the hope, the grace, the signs of God's dream that come in the smallest and most profound of ways, even in the times the world is torn apart.
These are the ways that close and accessible to us, the ways that being to remake the world.

In late October, ten of us from the church spent a morning at Turkey Run Park with Beth Norcross for a Grief in Nature retreat. There Beth shared how the natural world speaks to grief and to hope, to resting and to dreaming, to dying in one form and returning in another.

We looked at the buds on the trees just emerging in the fall, buds that will winter on the branches before blooming in the spring.

The buds are here now. They will not open until spring, but they are on the trees now. Go out to the trees near you and look, look closely. Look at how many branches still have buds on them, even without leaves.

Keep awake to the fig tree.

There are buds even now, pointing us toward God's dream.

And in this world, there are these metaphorical buds, pointing us toward God's dream.

During COVID, Rock Spring member Shirley Bloomquist has worked with EduTutorVA. The nonprofit's mission is to provide the most vulnerable K-12 public school students with free tutoring in core academic areas. The organization pairs students with college education majors from George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College to help students close their learning gaps. EduTutor is already providing (virtual) tutoring to students in Alexandria, Arlington, and Fairfax County public schools, with hopes to be able to offer expanded tutoring. Keep awake to the fig tree's buds, and look how they point to God's dream of equity.

Earlier this month, more than two dozen Rock Springers showed up to clean trash from Four Mile Run Stream. We had Tuli, age 5, wearing a sparkle skirt and boots for her first-ever volunteer project, joined by her little brother Caleb and parents, an 8 year old swimming in the cold water to capture a plastic bottle, YORS middle schoolers climbing on rocks, retirees scouting the stream. We understand that what is in the water impacts all of us, fish to humans. Keep awake to the fig tree's buds, and look how they point to God's dream of a restored earth.

Since the pandemic started, members of this church have been continued to offer meals for those being fed through the Safe Haven program and for SEEC workers doing day labor jobs. Now monthly meals come together with sandwiches from one home, fruit from another, with homemade cookies and with burritos bought from a local restaurant.... And all these donations are coordinated and arranged and picked up and delivered. It looks very different than when people were together cooking in Carpenter Hall... The church is not closed; it's moved to your kitchen! Keep awake to the fig tree's buds, and look how they point to God's dream that all may be fed by new systems.

The Mohawk word atetshents, which literally means “one who dreams,” is also the term for a doctor or shaman.

One who dreams is one who does the work of healing in the world.

This week, an ICU nurse at a hospital in El Paso shared a letter that he received. It read, “Hello. My name is Jeff. I have just read what seems to be the 10,000th news story on how your city is being hit by COVID. I am somewhere on the Asperger’s Spectrum, and while I have a degree in biology, I never had the skill set for medicine. I learned in Boy Scouts that if you can’t do the task, support those who can. So here’s \$5 for someone on your staff to buy a coffee or get something from a vending machine. Let them know their hard work is appreciated. Tell your staff they are doing a good job.”

As Jeff writes, “If you can’t do the task, support those who can.”
Keep awake to the fig tree’s buds, and look at how they point to God’s dream of health and wholeness for all God’s people.

How do you keep awake to hope in the world?
I invited two guests (Nick Giles and Mark Suriano) to answer this question, and here’s what they said....

And for a child’s perspective on hope.... A mother shared that she was surprised this week when her 8 year old asked her, “Do you want me to throw confetti in the car?”
“Umm, no, not in the car,” she said... “And why do you even have confetti?”
“It’s my emergency confetti,” her child replied. “You never know when you’re going to need it!”

So, settle into the darkness and the waiting of Advent.
Settle in to keeping awake, and watching, and dreaming out loud.
Settle in to the place between the first sleep and second.
Settle in to the anticipation and to the buds in winter....
Settle in with these words that Mary Oliver gives us in her poem “Dreams.”

*All night
the dark buds of dreams*

*open
richly.
In the center
of every petal
is a letter,
and you imagine
if you could only remember
and string them all together
they would spell the answer.
It is a long night,
and not an easy one —
you have so many branches,
and there are diversions —
birds that come and go,
the black fox that lies down
to sleep beneath you,
the moon staring
with her bone-white eye.
Finally you have spent
all the energy you can
and you drag from the ground
the muddy skirt of your roots
and leap awake
with two or three syllables
like water in your mouth
and a sense
of loss — a memory
not yet of a word,
certainly not yet the answer —
only how it feels
when deep in the tree
all the locks click open,
and the fire surges through the wood,
and the blossoms blossom.”*

Only how it feels
Deep in the tree

All the locks click open
And the fire surges through
The wood
And the blossoms blossom.

This Advent, look for the buds.
See the already as you work for the not yet of God's dream.
And keep awake so you don't miss that moment
When the blossoms blossom.

Amen