

**Three Mile an Hour God**  
(Mark 13:24-37; Isaiah 64:1-9)

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**Advent Themes**

The Readings for the first Sunday of Advent begin, as is customary, with “end of the world” language. The heavens are torn open, mountains quake, the moon and sun refuse to give light and the stars are falling out of the sky. And underlying this is the simmering anger of God, who is angered by our failure to see and respond to obvious signs of what is happening in the world.

And, as a way of instructing us on how to look for the signs of God’s coming, Jesus introduces the image of a fig tree. When we see the first buds on the tree, we know that summer is coming. It is a strangely peaceful and optimistic representation of what is to come, that seems out of place in the apocalypse he is describing.

As a whole our readings are a good reminder that when God comes to sort things out, that we all have reason to be terrified, because it means that God will us out too! And at the same time, the passage about the fig tree invites us to look out for God’s approach in a completely different way; not as a terrifying judgement, but as the coming of a

promising future. So, Advent begins by giving us cause for both fear and optimism.

And then there is Jesus's command: "Stay awake, pay attention, because you don't know the day and the hour when your master is coming. He could come at midnight, at dawn, basically at any time. So "Keep awake!".

### **Keeping Awake**

The reason we must be watchful is because we do not know exactly when our Master will reappear, when he comes. Christmas Eve will be the official moment when we celebrate his birth together. And while it may also be the actual moment, the birth that each of our hearts is waiting for is not as easy to pinpoint. When and how and where he will present himself in the days ahead is more mysterious than that. And so, we will need to be alert at all times to recognize and welcome him at whatever moment he chooses to appear.

It does seem that, as a culture, we are drifting further and further away from celebrating the Prince of Peace, and more and more toward the celebration of materialism. And when we add on global migrations and wars, dysfunctional politics and the degrading of the environment, domestic violence and all the rest of it, the world does often feel as

though it is coming apart in distressing and disillusioning ways. These are all the ominous sign of a greater collapse that is on the way (not exactly the blossoming buds of summer).

Isaiah speaks for us with direct and biting honesty, when he says:  
“We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away...  
O God, you have hidden your face from us!”

### **How to be watchful**

So, what I'd like to touch on today is the course of action that Jesus recommends in the Gospel reading; that we stay alert to watch for the signs of his coming.

Stay awake! O good! More sleeplessness in a world in which we are already feeling sleep deprived. That just sounds like adding one more thing to the busyness of a busier-than-usual season in a busy enough life. It sounds more like a recipe for burnout, than like a move toward the summer of peace that we all long for and that Jesus is hinting at.

But let's just pause and think about what it really means to be watchful. First of all we don't have to assume that being on watch is a responsibility that only falls on us individually. The church is a

community, and so being constantly watchful and prepared is a task that can fall on all of us together. We can take turns resting and keeping watch, sharing the tasks that will keep our church on its toes and prepared to receive the Master, when he comes.

### **Three Mile An Hour God**

But there is yet another way to think about how we can be more watchful, without making ourselves busier. And that is to slow down!

In fact, slowing down is the subject of a book called “Three Mile an Hour God.” And the main idea is that when God came and walked the earth, everywhere he went, he walked. And the speed of walking is about three miles an hour. So it stands to reason that the speed at which God chose to be present with us and to work among us was somewhere between zero and three miles an hour.

For us today, three miles an hour is an excruciatingly slow speed. We prefer 65 plus an extra five miles an hour, because the police almost never stop anyone who is going 70. And we have added these blazing speeds to a lot of the other things in our lives as well. For example, we have light at the flip of a switch, same day delivery, and the ability to talk to people on the other side of the planet on video, without even a quarter second time delay. Business as a whole is designed to get us

what we want, when we want it, and we want it now; especially at Christmas time!

But just because we have sped up the way we acquire things, doesn't mean God has chosen to change the speed at which he dispenses grace.

Things were already speeding up when I was a child. But time was still qualitatively different for us then, than it is today. Writing a letter overseas and getting one back took at least ten days. And during that time, there was a lot of time to think about the contents of what was said. A certain amount of patience was something we all had to learn. And whether we liked it or not a time of waiting and anticipation was built into most situations.

Back when I was in college, my Anthropology professor reminisced that the first time he went to do field work it took many days to get to the village in the Amazon jungle where he did field work. Now he could fly in and be there within hours.

You might think he would see this change as a great convenience, but he saw it as a loss. He felt that the time spent in a slow transition from city to country to river to village was a necessary experience in order to

truly locate his place in this world and to know how he should be present with the villagers.

Likewise, my dad used to tell a story about how, the first time he visited a famous temple on a mountain, he had to climb the thousand or so steps to reach it. But when he went back years later, there was an elevator taking people from a parking lot to the top. He too was disappointed to see this. The temple was put on the mountaintop in the first place to make the struggle to get there part of the experience. And using modern technology to remove the steep climb, stripped an essential piece out of the whole experience.

These laments from people of my parents generation tell us something about our addiction to speed and convenience; that it prevent us from truly seeing what we are supposed to see, if when it is right in front of us. And I think that this addiction is also part of what prevents us from being able to recognize Jesus when he comes. By skipping the physical journey, we miss the spiritual destination.

There are often times when I am busy trying to get things done, when someone will appear in my path and I will think to myself, "Oh no. I'm too busy to stop for this conversation." And when the person engages

me, I have to focus, so that my mind won't race ahead to what I was planning to do next.

What I have to acknowledge is that there is a part of me that is incredibly impatient; driven to do what I feel pressured to do, and that I am in some ways addicted to the unnaturally fast pace that another part of me knows is a problem. I also recognize that I was socialized this way in a society that is constantly encouraging us to try to do more in less time.

And the question is, "How will we recognize Jesus when he comes, if we are so busy trying to accomplish our tasks, that we have trouble slowing down enough to even recognize the people who are right in front of us?" And the answer is, we probably won't.

And if this is the case, it may also be true that, being more alert and ready to welcome Jesus is not really an additional task. That it actually involves slowing down and being willing to accomplish less, in order to be more present in the here and now. It may have more to do with operating at our natural walking pace of three miles an hour, than trying to walk at four or five miles an hour with our heads in the future.

As accustomed as we are to speeding things up through technology, it doesn't seem as though spiritual growth can be sped up. If as Isaiah suggests, God is our potter and we are the clay, it also stands to reason that, whether we like it or not, God turns the potter's wheel at whatever speed God's hands prefer to work and that there is not much that we who are the clay can or should do to effect that speed.

When we walk through life at three miles an hour, we are walking at the pace Jesus walked. That's a fact. And that suggests to me that we are walking at the pace in which we are more able to see as he sees. And Jesus had a way of seeing every detail that needed to be seen in any situation. He accurately read all the subtle signs in the actions of the people around him, even in a crowd.

He saw Zaccheaus way up in a tree, saw Nathaniel from afar off, felt the touch of a woman in a crowd, all encounters that never would have happened, if he had been travelling around the Galilee in a limousine.

And so, also for us, when everything around us seems so dramatic and angry and off the rails, it is easy to miss the subtlety of tiny buds on the trees, that point away from apocalypse and disaster to a peaceful summer beyond the winter storms. When we are going 65 miles an



hour down the highway of life, the buds appearing on the trees are just an unseen blur. But if we get out of the car and walk as Jesus walked, we may see how God is quietly working at nature's speed, preparing the world to burst again into bloom.