

'Intentional Faithfulness'

Mark 13:24-37

Intro

The first Sunday in Advent tends to have a theme that shows up in a variety of ways, and it is this: get ready.

The thing is, many of us now hear that call to prepare and, well, it doesn't seem to resonate all that strongly anymore. Maybe that's because we have heard that message before. Maybe it's because we don't really believe that the return of Christ will actually happen: we've been waiting for 2000 years...and here we are! Maybe it's because we've weaved those expectations of preparation into the different ways that the culture (as we've constructed it and have it constructed for us) calls for us to celebrate Christmas.

Whatever it is, we hear the call to 'get ready' in such a way that we nod in agreement...and then start to think about the other stuff that we need to get to after in order to make sure that Christmas meets our expectations, the expectations of the kids, the expectations of the friends that we will be posting this, that, and the other picture to on our social media outlet of choice.

So it is with that foundational reality in place that I heard these verses and said to myself that we need to engage in a reorientation of 'get ready' from sitting back and waiting, to being intentionally faithful. The scripture reads this way.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is 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 the watch.

³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

'Intentional Faithfulness'

Jen showed me a picture the other day of a gift that is available for purchase and it...let's say that it got me thinking.

So let me read the description (which is straight off your favorite online shopping resource). 'Looking for the Perfect Holiday Gift? Look no more! Imagine (a modern) Nativity Scene. A lot has changed in the last 2000 years. This Modern Nativity Set features all of these elements and a whole lot more. Displayed in your home, it's a sure conversation starter. Everyone's going to be asking where you bought it and how they can get one!

Meet the lovable cast: *Mary* showing off her high cheek bones with her best duck face. *Joseph* rocking his man bun and finest denim shirt. *Baby Jesus* resting in a manger. *The Three Wisemen* rocking their favorite hipster outfits on Segways with gifts. *The Shepherd*, Instagram tagging the event from his iPad, accompanied by his animals: a *Sheep* sporting its winter sweater and a 100% *Organic Cow* munching on its Gluten-Free feed. Finally, the *Stable* comes fully equipped with an eco-friendly solar panel.'

Now, please mind you, I do not present this example from a place of, 'how dare you mess with Christmas!'

After all, how many of us who were raised in the church grew up thinking (through all the religious imagery that adorned our particular churches) that Jesus was a Caucasian of northern European origin who stood about six foot tall and had blue eyes? The church that I was raised in had that 20 foot tall image emblazoned on the wall behind the pulpit.

Imagine my surprise...

No, the reason that I bring this up is because of the follow line: 'it's a sure conversation starter.'

What conversation is going to be initiated by this 'holiday cast' (not my words, mind you)?

Unfortunately, the trappings of the Christian religion have become something that can be easily made fun of because there have been way too many days in way too many ways when those of us who carry the Christian mantle have become more concerned with putting on a 'good Christmas', as opposed to being intentionally faithful.

For example, it would be so easy to look at the Hipster Nativity set and decry its 'sacrilegious nature'.

You know what's more impactful? Actually loving your neighbor as yourself, which necessarily means that you have to be in relationship with...your neighbor.

For those of you who were here last week, do you remember the description of the Shepherd that God provided for us through the prophet Ezekiel? 'I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.'

And, as we chatted about last week (see, this is why you never want to miss a Sunday!), these characteristics are to be exhibited by all those who follow God. That's intentional faithfulness and when that sort of living is being exhibited, then you don't have to worry or wonder when (and it is when) the master of the house will return. We'll be ready, because we will be faithfully engaged in caring for the world in the ways that God has first cared for us.

We need to quit trying to hit all of the right cultural notes of the season (making sure that everyone is appropriately impressed by the gifts that they have received) and instead love those who are in need.

We need to stop being worried about defending God in a world that seems bound and determined to belittle those who believe in the Almighty, let alone the idea that there is an actual Divine Creator, and instead faithfully follow the One whom we profess faith in.

We need to be intentionally faithful and that means we have to be attached to the world in a way so that we are able to actually...love.

This past week a husband drove himself and his wife over to Flemington and parked in front of Bed Bath and Beyond. The husband got out of the car alone to return an item and returned to the vehicle no more than 10 minutes later: he left his wife sleeping in the car.

The reason that I am telling this story is because the wife in question suffers with Alzheimer's. At some point while the husband was making the return, she got out of the car (with no ID, money or tracking device on her) and started walking.

The husband came back to find an empty car...and he started looking for her in an ever increasingly panicked way.

At some point, there was another couple who saw this anxious man looking for his loved one, and they stopped their lives and asked how they could help. The husband (exhibiting one of those embarrassed and proud moments that people do) tried to say that he would be okay. But they knew what they were seeing and what they were feeling and what they were seeing and feeling was someone who was in need. They wouldn't take, 'it's okay' for an answer. They worked in shifts. One of them stayed with the husband while the other went in a particular direction to search. The one who was looking would then come back and the other would head out to look. This went on for just shy of an hour.

Eventually, the husband called 911 to report that his wife was missing. A few minutes later the 911 operator was able to tell the desperate husband that his wife had fallen on the other side of Shop Rite and had been taken via ambulance to the hospital. She wasn't injured but not having any ID on her, the police made the call to care for her at the hospital until her loved ones were able to find her. He breathed a sigh of relief...and so did the stranger who had been looking for someone he had never met. He called up his wife and told her that the woman they had been looking for had been found. You could literally hear her response through the phone, 'Thank God.'

I have no idea what, if any religion, that couple practices. And you know what? That doesn't matter.

What does matter is that they were plugged into the world around them firmly enough to recognize a need and respond to it. They lived out love and in doing so were intentionally faithful (for where love is...there God is as well).

We have to be plugged into the world around us (and that means so much more than rolling our eyes at whatever the President decides to comment upon in inappropriate ways, having our jaws drop at another entertainment personality losing their job because inappropriate conduct, or getting sucked into the release of whatever the next 'it' movie trailer happens to be). We have to be plugged in so that we are able to respond in intentionally faithful ways.

Next Sunday we are going to take part in the annual tradition of presenting the White Gifts that we have purchased. Now, my hunch is that if you have pulled one of those tags you know what the person has asked for (because that is what you have been or are going to be shopping for).

That's socially necessary.

Do you remember the name of the person for who you are shopping? Have you prayed for that person and for the organization that helps to support them and, ultimately, supplied their name to you so that you might be able to purchase the gift? (And mind you, I ask that question from a place of guilt because I realized that I needed to look up the names of the children whom my family was shopping for this past Wednesday.)

That's a simple example of being intentionally faithful.

As we gather in on this first Sunday of Advent, we're able to be reminded through the example of Jesus, whom we remember in special ways through this Communion meal the remarkable ways that living intentionally faithful can not only start a conversation but change the world. And again, this type of intentional faithfulness is now meant to be felt in and through all those who declare their allegiance to him.

Look, I get it, there are a myriad of examples where the people of the church can get wrapped up in declaring, 'here are all the ways the culturing is belittling Christmas', or at the very least crying out, 'here are the ways that people should celebrate Christmas'.

But at the end of the day, what matters most is being intentionally faithful. That will allow us to keep alert for the time that no one knows. Be plugged in to the people around us so that we are able to share the love of Christ. You want to start a conversation around Christmas? Let your intentionally faithful actions get the ball rolling.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy and gracious Lord, it was declared in unambiguous ways that we need to stay alert. Help us to do that very thing...by being plugged in to those around us and being intentionally faithful. Help us to love as You first loved us by caring for those around us, thereby starting a conversation that speaks to how powerfully Your presence is able to be felt in and through all those who declare their faith in You and Your son. Lord, let it be so. Amen.