

# “How Do You Wake Up in a Weary World?”

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

*First of Six in the sermon series: “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?”*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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An Advent Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent 1, December 3, 2023, dedicated to my grandchildren - Hazel, Axel, Emryn, Rylan, Aaden, Ethan and Benton and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.  
Amen.*

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I need to know something before I share my meditation this morning. How many of you are **actually awake**? I need to know – because that information seems particularly important to Jesus. So, are you awake this morning? Seriously, (because Jesus is being pointedly serious) – how many of you are awake? Are your eyes open? Are you paying attention? Are you watching and aware and of what is happening around you? Are you taking care of yourself and the world around you? In the words of the old camp song are you *“alive, awake, alert, and enthusiastic?”*

As we launch into Advent today, Isaiah tells us to open our eyes, ears and minds to this new day. He says that God is coming and that we should be praying for God’s arrival – like a Potter, God’s hands will shape us into the people God longs for us to be. In the apocalyptic passage from Mark, Jesus tells us that God will be coming soon - breaking the cycles of days, seasons and everything we know to be the way it was before. Mark proclaims that

when God comes, the farthest star and the smallest blade of grass, everything else in all creation will be affected by the power of our creator. For Isaiah, our job is to prepare through prayer. For Mark, we are told to stay awake, to be faithful as though we are already standing in the presence of the One who is coming in the name of the Lord.

Don't be deceived by Christmas music and all the decorations all around us, we don't begin with "comfort and joy." We begin with "despair and desperation." We begin in darkness. The arrival of the Light of the World is 21 days and a few hours away.

This is a message for the spiritually mature delivered at a time when we really want to hold onto, cuddle and rock the baby in the manger (or one of the beautiful babies in our pews or the nursery). So, if you are coming to church for the first time in a while, or have never been here before, welcome to the wild ride of Advent! Hold onto your faith – whether you have a lot or a little. It will be shaken like a glass snow globe before our ride is over. To quote Dorothy, we are not in Kansas anymore. To quote Santa, this doesn't look like the North Pole. To quote Jesus, "WAKE UP! It is Advent – we are starting over" – (which is what advent means).

To get to Christmas we must go through Isaiah and Mark and the land of John the Baptizer. It is a barren land where one must look hard for desert flowers. Today alone, the prophet Isaiah speaks of destruction and Jesus speaks of the end of the world as we know it. According to ancient scripture, Humankind has reached the end of its rope. All our schemes and neat ideas for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves have come to nothing. We cannot save ourselves. Without God, there will be no saving going down.

This moment reminds me of a couple who came to me more than 30 years ago from outside the church. Their marriage was in trouble. You name and they had it going on between them. After our second session, they asked me if there was hope for their marriage. I breathed deep and answered sincerely,

“Only God can save this marriage.” They cancelled their next session. I didn’t hear from them for a little while. So, I called them and asked what happened. They responded – “you said only God could save our marriage and we don’t believe in God, so we are getting a divorce.” Wow! I thought God saving us was a good thing. I didn’t see that coming!

Friends, when we read “that only God can save us” – that is not a bad thing. It means we just need to stay awake and pay attention to the signs of God’s presence in this season and in our lives and ask God for help. This season of Advent strips us down to bare essentials and forces us to begin again. Is it any wonder that we want to get to our Christmas carols and good tidings of comfort and joy. By the end of our Advent boot camp, we will find ourselves in the embrace of Christmas – in a new beginning – a place where hope comes out of seeming hopelessness, where yearnings for God have brought us face-to-face with our maker, and where new songs are sung in a world off its rails.

Isaiah kicks off the season with a prayer. Spoken by a people who are powerless and under oppression, Isaiah’s prayer lifts up the two main features of Advent hope. On the one hand, there is a *deep sense of desperation* about a situation out of control is sounded. On the other hand, *a bold and confident trust in God* is given voice to a God who can (and will?) intervene to make life peace-able and joyous. Life without God is unbearable. That is the present tense of Isaiah’s prophecy. Moreover, life with God can be completely transformed – which is the urgent hope of a future tense (Walter Brueggemann, in *Texts for Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993, p. 2).

While Isaiah points out the fire and destruction growing out of the unfaithfulness of God’s people, the passage pivots on “**we attah,**” which is Hebrew for “**nevertheless.**” The prophet introduces God to us in three staggering indicatives – in spite of all sins and failings, God is found in the “nevertheless.” Isaiah says, “You are our Father, you are our potter, and we are the work of your hands.” As potter and father, as Creator of all, Isaiah cries

to God not to destroy those who have been so unfaithful. He cries out, *“don’t hold our sins against us forever!”*

In Mark 13:24-37, Jesus shifts the narrative of earlier chapters and verses from healing, teaching and preaching to paying attention, watching out and waking up. The shift is dramatic, apocalyptic and mythic in proportion. At the same time, it is subtle, too. Like Isaiah, the conversation pivots on one word. While Isaiah’s pivotal word is *“nevertheless!”* Jesus’ word in Mark is *“see!”*

Jesus says the signs are coming of the end that is at hand. While there is no way to anticipate the time or the signs of the end, you can keep your eyes open. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the author uses the word *“Blepo”* to mean an eye-opening and ready for prime-time faith. *“Blepo”* means you are watching out. It is a kind of spiritual discernment for where you are and what you see. *“Blepo”* protects a disciple from being misled by external appearances.

But, suddenly and subtly, the verb changes to *“Gregoreo”* – which means *“to see something different so you act in a new way.”* So – follow this – now the disciple of Christ must not simply stand and watch for the return of the Lord but must act a completely different way anticipating God’s return. What was spiritual perception (*“Blepo”*) must now lead directly to faithful behavior (*“Gregoreo”*).

In other words, **“get your act together!”** How many of us are messing things up in our own lives by our own actions? How many of us are angry or out of sorts and just keep acting that way? How many of us are in “a bad space” right now – a space we could move out of us if we simply chose to move?

Here at the end of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is on the edge of his trial and crucifixion when he speaks these words. He is not a baby in a manger. He is a man facing death on a cross. He tells his disciples to stop being babies and start being mature men and women of faith. He says: *Wake up! Grow up! Sober up! Step up! Turn your life around – NOW! Get your act together!*

As I stand and deliver this message today, I have to admit, I do so with fear and trembling. From way up high in this box, I do so knowing that these words cut to me and mine just as they cut to you and yours. I feel like these are words of searing truth for every single one of us. They are words we need to hear. I also know they are words we don't like to hear.

And they are also words that need to be heard by the whole world around us, too. It is true. We need a new brand of truth. We need to confess our sins – sins of racism, antisemitism, economic inequalities and shrinking lack of opportunity for those born Black or Brown or born on the wrong side of the tracks. We need to confess our divisions which keep us from God and one another. We need a new brand of truth growing out of suffering.

In the face of all that is wrong, we need to embrace “Nevertheless!” And we need to See! It is time to wake up. So, wake up in the midst of this weary world. Open your weary eyes and take in what you see. Take a look inside and only then – take a look all around. It is time to wake up and see. Amen.