



"At the Threshold"

Scripture – Mark 13:24-37

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, December 3, 2023

My professor had made a doorway on the stage. The entire class was gathered in the auditorium of Peabody Hall for the first lecture of our freshmen seminar. It was a course called "Turning Points and Border Crossings," and there was a concept our professor needed us to understand: Liminality ... Liminality — the state of being in between, of standing at the threshold. So she'd pulled the theatre curtains until they were *almost* closed, and she'd dropped the valence so that it hung just seven feet above the stage. And she stood in the makeshift doorway. Occasionally, she'd step forward, into our shared space. Sometimes, she'd step backward, so she was beyond the boundary. But, mostly, she balanced on the threshold to illustrate to our cohort of college kids what it means to be in between ... what it means to occupy liminal space.

Friends, we have entered liminal space. The season of Advent is liminal space. During these weeks leading up to Christmas, the church stands at the threshold, retelling a story about a God who *has* entered into our broken world, about a God who *promises to return* to make all things new. During Advent, the faithful stand in the doorway between past and future. It's the perfect vantage point. From here, we look backward and remember everything God has already done. From here, we look forward and anticipate everything God will yet do. We occupy liminal space.

It's a strange place to be; it's a counter-cultural place to be. The rest of the world has jumped into Christmas with both feet. Heck, they've done a cannonball into a pool of eggnog. But we hold back. The church stands at the edge a little longer. Because there's something we need to do first. Before we jump into the joy of Christmas, we must acknowledge the ache in our souls. It's an ache that comes from knowing that all is *not* calm, all is *not* bright. No amount of tinsel can obscure the brokenness of this world. So we hold back; we wait in liminal space, leaning into our longing, our lament. The doorway is the place for people who aren't satisfied with the way things are.

During the season of Advent we prepare for the birth of a Messiah who has *already* come ... *and* we long for the day when God's promises of hope, peace, joy and love will be well and truly fulfilled. We

rejoice that the Prince of Peace has been born among us, yet we long for the day when nations will beat swords into plowshares — weapons of war into tools that sustain life. We give thanks that healing has come in Christ, yet we wait impatiently for the restoration of all who suffer. We ready our voices to exclaim: “Joy to the World, the Lord is come!,” yet we groan with eager longing for Christ to come again and “rule the world with truth and grace.” During the season of Advent, the church stands in between ... between past and future, between memory and hope. We occupy liminal space.

But what does this mean? What does it mean to linger on the threshold? Do we stand still, waiting for something to happen? Or is there something more expected of us?

Well, today’s text from the Gospel of Mark gives us one answer: “Keep awake!” Three times Jesus charges his disciples: *Keep alert, keep awake! For you do not know the day or the hour when your Lord will return.*

To be honest — the return of the Son of Man sounds like an event most of us would rather sleep through. Not that we could, with stars falling from the sky and celestial orbs quaking in the heavens. Still, if I had my way, I’d hide under the covers rather than witness the cosmic disturbance Jesus describes. But that’s not what the faithful are supposed to do. Christ instructs us to remain watchful: *What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!*

While this sounds *to us* like an ominous prophecy, the event Jesus describes was actually intended to inspire hope. In the 13th chapter of this Gospel, Mark’s Jesus offers a word of encouragement to Mark’s original audience. The first hearers of this Gospel were in crisis. Rome had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and — in doing so — had thrown the people into theological turmoil. The temple was their holy site — the very place God had chosen to dwell. Without the temple, how would they ever encounter God’s presence? Without the temple, where on earth would they find God?

To a people who’d been thrown into the depths of despair, Jesus offers a word of hope. In crafting the Messiah’s speech, the Gospel writer drew upon a familiar genre; Mark used a template borrowed from Apocalyptic Literature, which his original audience would have known from books like Daniel and Enoch. They would have recognized common tropes, like cosmic disturbances and the advent, or arrival, of God. But the twist at the end might have surprised them. Where they would have expected a scene of judgment, Mark’s Jesus sets before them a vision of grace.¹ Christ promises that — when the Son of Man comes in glory — God’s people will be gathered into God’s presence. No longer will they need to find the holy in a holy place. For the Holy One will have found them.

Keep alert, Jesus tells them. Watch with hope-filled expectation for this grace-filled advent. *Keep awake!* Make sure you’re ready whenever the Lord comes! Jesus instructs his followers to be like servants who have been left in charge of the master’s house. They know not when their Lord will return, but they must watch for him in the evening and at midnight and at dawn. Yes, Mark’s Jesus likens this posture of anticipation to servants who remain ready for their master’s return.

¹ David Schnasa Jacobsen, “Commentary on Mark 13:24-37,” www.workingpreacher.org.

But the image *I* can't shake from *my* mind is the one from Luke 15, of a father watching with hope-filled expectation for the return of his prodigal son. It's the image of a father who remains at the ready. Every morning he checks his son's room to make sure the bed is made; the floors, swept; the dresser, dusted — just in case he'll need the room tonight. Every evening, he polishes the signet ring and presses the special robe, so they'll be ready for the homecoming celebration. He keeps the pantry stocked with his son's favorite foods. And, every few minutes, the father pauses in the doorway; he stands at the threshold, scanning the horizon for a glimpse of his beloved boy. How else would he have noticed the prodigal while he was still far off? How else would he have been ready to hike up his robes and run to greet the one for whom he had waited?

Like servants watching for the master's return, like a father watching for the prodigal's homecoming, we are called to stay alert. To keep awake. To trust that our hopes will be fulfilled. This is the posture we are to assume during Advent, as we linger on the threshold between past and future, between memory and hope. It is not a posture of complacency but of hope-filled expectation. We do not twiddle our thumbs, waiting for God to tap us on the shoulder. Rather, we busy ourselves with preparations while keeping one eye fixed on the horizon, watching for glimpses of God's presence among us.

As we stand at the doorway, we take a moment to look backward — to remember everything God has already done. And we let memory shape our expectation. Perhaps, we shouldn't be looking toward heaven, watching for the Son of Man to ride in upon the clouds. Because God has a history of showing up in far more subtle ways, like as a tiny babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Perhaps we shouldn't watch for the sun to turn black or the moon to fade into darkness. Because God has a habit of re-making the world *not* through cosmic disturbances, but through love and compassion and grace. As we stand at the threshold between memory and hope, we begin to glimpse God's presence in the least likely of places ...

A Palestinian-American poet named Naomi Shihab Nye tells the story of one such moment.² That's how *I* would describe it, at least. It's a story of encounter. It's a story about God showing up in a very surprising place, indeed — in a terminal at the Albuquerque Airport.

The poet begins:

*After learning my flight had been delayed four hours,
I heard an announcement,
"If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic,
please come to the gate immediately."*

Well — one pauses these days, she writes. But Naomi went to the gate, anyway. There she found an older woman in Palestinian traditional dress who was crumpled on the floor, wailing. The woman thought the flight had been canceled, and she needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatments. In broken Arabic Naomi assured her the flight *would* take off, just a few hours later than planned. And, then, to pass the time, the pair started making phone calls. Naomi called the woman's sons to let them

² Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4," poets.org.

know she'd be late. Then Naomi called her dad, and let the woman speak to him in Arabic. Turns out they had ten mutual friends. By now, the older woman was laughing a lot.

Naomi continues her story:

*She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—
little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—
from her bag—
and was offering them to all the women at the gate.
To my amazement, not a single woman declined one.
It was like a sacrament.
The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—
we were all covered with the same powdered sugar.
And smiling.
There is no better cookie.*

*And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers
and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it
and they were covered with powdered sugar, too.
And I noticed my new best friend—
by now we were holding hands—
had a potted plant poking out of her bag,
some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves.
Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.*

*And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought,
This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.
Not a single person in that gate—
once the crying of confusion stopped—
seemed apprehensive about any other person.
They took the cookies.
I wanted to hug all those other women, too.
This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.*

This *can* still happen anywhere. Because — even in this liminal space between past and future, between memory and hope — God shows up. Even to a world that is broken and war-torn and weary of waiting, God shows up. Through sugar-covered cookies served with apple juice or through simple gifts of bread and wine. Through a community gathered together in grace and the hospitality of strangers. God comes among us still, in ways that remake the world through love and compassion and grace. And so, we watch with expectant hope for glimpses of God's goodness and glory. We open ourselves to others — whether the stranger in need of service, or the loved one in need of companionship. We inhabit the shared world — the world we want to live in. We stay alert. We keep awake. And we trust that the one who came among us as the Babe of Bethlehem makes a home among us still ... often showing up in the least likely of places.