

Daniel 12:1-3

Psalm 16

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 13:1-8

Sermon for November 17, 2024

SLEEP WELL

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Summary: Tomorrow is a new day.

I'm not a fan of horror movies. I think the last one I paid to see in a movie theater was *THE EXORCIST*, and I wish I had that three dollars back, which gives you some idea of how long ago that was. Even as a kid when my friends and I would go to see whatever was showing at our local movie theater every Saturday, I always found some excuse for copping out when it was a *Godzilla* movie or anything along those lines.

And yet I do have one pleasurable or at least semi-pleasurable memory of going to a church camp one summer when I was probably ten or eleven years old. It was bedtime the first day at the camp, and all the other little kids and I were tucked into our bunk beds around the perimeter of the barracks room where we were going to sleep. It was after lights out and the room was dark, and suddenly a voice in the room said he was going to tell us a story. I recognized the voice as belonging to one of the older kids, a veteran of earlier camps. Each of the barracks rooms had one such older kid, who I guess was there to provide some sort of emotional security to us newbies who were spending our first night away from the familiar company of our own families. I supposed he was going to tell us some nice little story about Jesus or something along those lines. But no. In what I later realized was probably an initiation rite that all kids are subjected to in all kinds of summer camps, this young sadist started telling us a ghost story.

I remember to this day my dawning and terrifying realization, lying there in this unfamiliar bed, as his disembodied voice filled that dark room in a strange place, that this wasn't going to be some pleasant little religious story, but that instead it was going to be a terrible, horrifying, frightening story, even worse than Godzilla. I remember wrapping the pillow around my head to try to shut out that voice, and yet at the same time straining to hear each excruciating detail. And when he finally came to the punch line of the story, a bloodcurdling cry of anguish, I must have levitated a foot off the bed as I joined my own scream of terror to those of the other dozen or so little boys in that room.

It was wonderful in a horrible way, the most fun I ever had falling asleep.

And so I guess I have some inkling of why horror movies continue to be made, and why millions and millions of people pay good money to be scared out of their wits for a couple of hours. I have some understanding of why people who would flee in terror if they ever saw an actual man in a hideous mask holding a bloody chainsaw walk into their living room will sit in a movie theater munching popcorn when they see it happening to someone else on a movie screen.

It's because somehow or other people have two levels of consciousness: there's the part where they see and hear things, and the other, deeper part, where they remain aware of a deeper and truer reality, one in which they are fundamentally safe and secure, and can still enjoy their popcorn.

What does that have to do with our Gospel reading for today. Let's read it together, and then think about it.

Mark 13:1-8

This is a lovely scene, in which Jesus, again, shows us an element of what he must have been like as a human being. The scene is Jerusalem, and the time is during the last week of Jesus' earthly life. He has just spent a grueling day dealing with all the arguments and opposition of those in the city, all those whose determined opposition would soon bring him to the cross. For some of his disciples, it must have been their first visit to that amazing city with its wondrous Temple with its magnificent courts on top of Mount Moriah, because like an excited child after its first visit to Disney World one of them starts exclaiming to Jesus about the marvels of that glorious architecture. And in Mark's telling of it, we find Jesus, no doubt very weary by this time, somewhat callously telling him that the beautiful building

will someday soon be utterly destroyed. We can imagine that the young disciple must have been hurt by his master throwing cold water on his excited admiration. And in Mark's telling of it, Jesus may himself have regretted his response, because we see Jesus, a little later, sitting down in weariness on a hillside outside the city, and looking back on it as some of his older and closer disciples approach him, seeking more information about what they had overheard him say. "When is this going to happen, then," they ask. "This awful destruction?"

And Jesus then, instead of giving them more detail, speaks to the much deeper issue that must have been on his heart when he spoke so curtly to the younger disciple.

And there's a kind of winsomeness there, isn't there?, one with which we can all identify. How often have we said something in weariness or distraction that we later realize may have been hurtful, that we wish we could amplify or explain? But now it's too late. Jesus truly was one with us, in every respect.

And what does he now wish he might have said to the young disciple? He didn't intend simply to dash his optimism, but to substitute for it a deeper, truer optimism, an eternal optimism. The verses that follow, to my ear, might represent what Jesus wishes he had said earlier, but was simply distracted, or weary, or perhaps even exasperated. You know, the way we all get.

His disciples had asked him about the specifics of the temple destruction, but Jesus, as he so often does, instead speaks to the concerns that must have been in their hearts, rather than the questions floating around in their minds. While their gaze remains focused on the magnificent building atop the hill opposite from where they were sitting, Jesus was instead looking at their lives, and all the things the future would hold for them, and his concern for them, for the condition of their hearts, led him to his great reassurance:

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen. But the end is not yet."

The context in which Jesus is speaking here is necessarily that of a specific place and time. The place is that little hill outside of Jerusalem, with his four oldest and closest students gathered around him. The time is a few days before his own death, when their guide through life and their supreme source of strength and assurance will be taken from them, tortured and put to hideous death on a cross. And in the years that follow, those young men will face a world in constant upheaval; their

lives will be full of danger and disappointment and dashed hopes and persecution and even death. For that specific place and time Jesus spoke the words these young men needed to hear.

He is saying to them, in effect, the world is full of terrible possibilities, and many of them will become actualities. In your world, in your lifetimes, families will be torn apart; nature will take terrible tolls; famine and poverty will drive people to desperation; nations will rise up against nations, and you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. But what? But do not be afraid. And why not? Because the end is not yet. The end of the world? No, the end of these things. The deliverance into a better world is not yet. Not *never*, but rather, *not yet*.

Saint Paul cloaks this promise of Jesus in different imagery:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (2 Cor 5: 1)

The first followers of Jesus had his personal, face-to-face assurance. But it is always important to remember that whenever Jesus spoke, he was speaking God's truth, and God's truths apply to all God's children. What he said to them then, he says to each of us now.

Look around the world today, two thousand years later, and what do we see? We see nature taking terrible tolls, we see famine and poverty driving people to desperation, we see wars far more terrible than any of Christ's time. And Christ's message to us is the same as it was to Peter and James and John on that hillside: do not be afraid. This world is real, those catastrophes are real, in our reality. And if there were no other reality, those would be reasons for despair. Wars and rumors of war would make mockery of our hope and our optimism.

But even more importantly, every single human life experiences the personal counterparts of those wars, of those shocks and defeats and disappointments. And every human life eventually falls final victim to the ravages of time, as surely as if they had fallen on the battlefield of actual war. This is our reality.

The first followers of Jesus had his personal assurance that there is another reality, a better reality, and most importantly, a truer reality, than the one that confronts them in their day-to-day lives. And we have the same assurance, because Jesus was speaking to us as well as to them. Like the little children who can still get a good night's sleep after levitating from their beds because they know that, when they

wake up, it will be to a fresh morning and a good breakfast and another day full of joyful activity and an evening of song and celebration around a warm campfire with a sky full of sparkling stars overhead, just so those who rest our faith in Christ know that there is another reality, a better reality, and most of all a truer reality that awaits us, once we have laid our burdens, however heavy and frightening they may have been, at his feet.

Like them, we need not fear wars or rumors of wars, whether they are the wars of the world or the wars within our own lives. Like them, we need not fear the stories of ghosts and goblins and things that go bump in the night. Like them, we will all wake up to a good breakfast, with a hearty appetite.

So sleep well, my friends. Tomorrow is always a new day.

And our bedtime prayer this morning is for faith of children lying in the dark, listening to ghost stories; the faith that can face the future because it sees a true and eternal future of peace in God's kingdom, because that's the future Jesus always saw, and we pray in his name.