

Mark 13: 14-37

14 'But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; ¹⁵someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; ¹⁶someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. ¹⁷Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! ¹⁸Pray that it may not be in winter. ¹⁹For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. ²⁰And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. ²¹And if anyone says to you at that time, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "Look! There he is!"—do not believe it. ²²False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³But be alert; I have already told you everything.

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.
²⁶Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷Then 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. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven 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. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It 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. ³⁵Therefore, 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, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Meditation: This whole passage draws on imagery from Daniel 7. It begins with allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem, perhaps to attempts by pagan rulers to set up their own statues in the midst of the temple. Again there will be false prophets claiming the truth and false messiahs claiming to be the one. This time people are warned to flee into the mountains and those who are burdened with infants will find it extra difficult. But then the discourse shifts once again to the cosmic signs of the end. The elect will be gathered together from 'the four winds' by the Son of Man.

The discourse ends in seeming contradiction. On the one hand there is reference to the fig tree and how when it blossoms one knows summer is near. All of these developments and events should be read as signs that the end of the present world order is near. And the end, according to v. 30 is not far away. Disciples must discern the signs. On the

other hand, v.32 suggests that no-one, not even Jesus, knows when the end will be. Therefore, the disciple is urged to remain watchful, awake, alert, always ready for a meeting with their Lord.

But isn't such advice a terrible way to cope? On the one hand we need to discern what the message for us is, given the reality of a global pandemic. The world around us is also exploding as our black siblings are awakening us to the intolerability of the racism they've faced for generations. What's coming ahead and how do we prepare for it? How do we discern and prepare for the major changes that must happen? How do we become the change we want and hope to see in the world?

On the other hand, we're told that uncertainty about what's to come is the way it will inevitably be. We can't know the future and all preparation and planning for it is like looking through a frosty window rather than a clear pane of glass.

So what's the advice? Always be ready. 'Keep awake.' But don't we also need to learn to let go and let be? Don't we need to turn it off regularly and just embrace the moment? Don't we need to just live in the now and not get swallowed up by concern about the future?

Yes, we do, absolutely. But we do, also, need to prepare and to plan. And certainly, with a pandemic in full swing and protests we're called to engage with, we also need to find ways to unplug, refresh and recharge our spirits, so that we wake up and engage our world, trusting that 'the Son of man' will gather us toward a new day and a new way.

Prayer: We know we need to keep awake, O God. Stir us up to wake up. We know we need to prepare for what we cannot know fully is coming. Inspire us with discernment and focus. But we also need to better learn how to live with uncertainty, O God. We need to learn how to let go, let be and trust in you. Journey with us, O God, above us, beside us and within us, as we find our way between preparation, keeping awake, and finding time and space internally to replenish and regenerate. May faith, hope and love rise up in new ways within us, in a genuine way, a way that is our own. You can do all things, O God. Give us faith anew; Amen.