

Advent

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. Glad we could be here together. December 26, 2004, you may remember this date. It was the deadliest tsunami in recorded history.

This was a tsunami that was caused by an earthquake, a massive earthquake under the Indian Ocean. It was a 9.1 on the Richter scale. And this earthquake created waves that were 100 feet high and that traveled 500 miles an hour.

And you know, this wreaked massive devastation. Some estimates say close to 300,000 people were killed as a result of the waves that radiated out from this earthquake.

And one of those waves headed toward Indonesia. Indonesia was right in the path. And you know, there was massive devastation there, lots of loss of life. But what's interesting is there was a small tribe of people, the Mokin Sea Gypsies, who lived right on the beach, right in the path of this tsunami.

And while there was massive devastation all around and tons of loss of life, the Mokin people survived the tsunami. 100-foot wave, traveling 500 miles an hour. And the big question is, how in the world could they have survived?

[1 : 18] And the answer is, is that for generations, the elders who led this tribe had passed down knowledge and teaching from one generation to the next.

And this knowledge and teaching included the signs to look for and the ways to recognize the coming of a great wave like a tsunami.

And so when these early signs began to manifest, when all of the birds stopped chirping, and when all of the hermit crabs started heading into the woods, and when all of the deep sea fish started surfacing, and when all of the dolphins started heading out to deeper waters, and when all of these strange things started happening, most people didn't even notice.

When all of the water drained away from the shore and left fish flopping in the wet sand, many people looked on it with a kind of curiosity.

That's an interesting thing. Wonder what's going on there. Many more people grabbed baskets and went down. They thought it was their lucky day. They began grabbing and filling their baskets with fish, thinking that they were going to have a feast that night.

[2 : 22] Little did they know that a wave the size of a skyscraper was racing toward them. The Moken people, however, recognized all of these signs for what they were.

They recognized the truth about what was coming, and so they knew to get their people out of the way and get them to high ground. And so while people all around them were obliterated, they survived.

And this is an example of what we might call faithful vigilance. They were faithfully and vigently watching for the signs that they had been taught to watch for. And in Luke chapter 21, Jesus is doing something similar with his disciples.

He's saying, I'm going to teach you what you are to look out for, the signs that you are to look out for, and then you're going to pass this knowledge down to the next generation, and the next generation, and the next generation.

And this has come all the way down to us. We are now, like those elders, receiving that knowledge, right? But Jesus is not just talking about a tsunami.

[3 : 27] Jesus is talking about something far greater, and for many people, far more terrifying. He's saying that at some point, it could be an hour from now, it could be a thousand years from now, but at some point, there will be a moment when Jesus returns.

And at that moment, everything is going to change in an instant. So this passage, and specifically the end of it, verses 34 through 36, is all about how to prepare for that day, how to prepare for the

second coming of Jesus.

And we can summarize his teaching under three headers. Keep watch. Stay awake. Stand firm. Keep watch. Stay awake. Stand firm.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that this is not something that we have fabricated. It's not just the accumulated wisdom of human teaching or even tribal elders, but rather this is something that is divinely revealed to us, that these words reflect those things that you would have every follower of Jesus know in our hearts, Lord, and live out.

And so we pray that we would be receptive to what you have to tell us this morning. In your son's name, amen. So keep watch. Stay awake. Stand firm. First of all, Jesus says, keep watch.

[4 : 48] This entire section of Luke begins when Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem, and someone looks up at the temple, and they remark, we don't know who it is, probably one of his disciples, and someone says, look how beautiful the temple is.

Look at all of those precious stones. Look at all of the riches. Look at the glory and the splendor. It's an amazing thing to behold. Right? And how does Jesus respond? Right? Jesus doesn't say, I know, it's amazing, isn't it?

You know, you wish just once Jesus would give like a normal response, but he doesn't. You know, Jesus gives the Debbie Downer response. It's like, wah, wah. You know, Jesus says, yeah, that building, it's nice, isn't it?

And, you know, pretty soon it's going to be so destroyed that there's not going to be one stone even left standing on another. And you can see sort of his disciples like, whoa, you know, you know, don't have to be so intense.

But Jesus sees this as an opportunity to begin to teach them something that they need to know. And he begins through this entire section to teach them about the connection between the coming destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and his second coming.

[5 : 53] Because there's a connection there. And people look at this chapter and they wonder, what's he talking about? Is he talking about the destruction of the temple or is he talking about his second coming in the world? And the answer is both.

He's talking about both. In the Bible, before there was ever a Jewish temple, all of creation was God's temple.

The world is the original temple. And so the temple in Jerusalem, the temple that was the kind of seat of Jewish culture and identity and religion, this temple is what we call a type.

It's like a symbol of creation itself. And so what Jesus teaches essentially in this chapter is that God is going to destroy the temple.

And that's going to be a sign that at some point down the road, we don't know when, Jesus is going to come and he's going to restore the world to be God's true temple.

[6 : 55] We no longer need this brick and mortar temple because one day this entire world, every leaf, every branch, every blade of grass, every mountain, every river, every ocean is going to be the great temple of God.

That was God's original intent. And that's the reason Jesus is coming again. And so that's what's going to happen. And Jesus says, though, that this is not all going to happen at once, that there's going to be the destruction of the temple.

And that's going to be a sign that that other event, Jesus' second coming, is going to happen. So he says, when you see the temple destroyed, you know that if I'm making that accurate prediction, then you know that eventually the other prediction is going to come true.

I'm going to come back and restore the cosmos to be God's great temple. And so Jesus says there's going to be a span of time in between. In verse 9b, he says, For these things must first take place, the destruction of the temple, the persecution of Christians.

But the end will not be at once. There's a span of time. And, of course, we know that just a few decades after Jesus made this prediction, in 70 A.D., the Jewish temple was, in fact, destroyed.

[7 : 59] Emperor Titus retook Jerusalem from the rebels who had tried to capture it, the Jewish rebels who were rebelling against Rome. Titus responds in force, sacks Jerusalem, destroys the temple, burns it to the ground.

And so what that tells us is that happened just as Jesus said it would. And so now we are in that in-between time between the sacking of the temple and the restoration of the cosmos.

And so we recognize that and so we pay attention. So right now, Jesus says, we're in that time. And so that means we need to be watchful. We need to be watchful. He says in verse 34, watch yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life.

And that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. Watch yourselves means pay attention. That's the word. Pay attention. And pay attention to what matters.

There was a famous experiment done at Harvard. Don't know if you're familiar with it. But it was an experiment where they created a video. And this video had three people in white shirts and three people in black shirts.

[9 : 07] And they're all moving around a room passing basketballs back and forth to one another. And they took participants in and they showed them this video. And they said, we want you to count all of the times that someone with a white shirt passes the ball.

And at the end we'll ask you the total. And so these participants sit and they all watch this video of basketballs being passed around. And at the end the researchers come in and they say, how many passes did you count? And most people get it right.

And then they ask the real question of the study. Did you see the gorilla? You know this study? Right in the middle of the video, a person literally in a gorilla suit comes into the middle of the frame and sort of dances around, you know, a little bit.

And just kind of walks around, right? And then just kind of walks off, right? But half of the participants had no idea the gorilla even came in. They said, what gorilla?

What are you talking about? And they showed them the video again. And everybody said, oh my gosh, I didn't even see it. It's an amazing groundbreaking study because it illustrates something called inattentive blindness. It turns out that we don't see everything that's happening around us all the time.

[10 : 20] In fact, we miss most of it. We only tend to see and to record things that we're already paying attention to. And here's the key point. If we're not paying attention to the right things, we can quite literally be blind to the things that matter most.

So it really matters what we are paying attention to because that determines what we see and what we remain blind to. And the point is this. I think it is so profoundly easy to waste our lives counting basketball passes.

You know, counting basketball passes. Looking at things that don't matter. Attending to things that are meaningless. Worrying about things that are vapor. And we can spend so much time and energy counting passes that we miss the 800-pound gorilla.

And what is that? That's what Jesus is talking about here. One day, when Jesus comes again, the only thing that is going to matter is our relationship to him.

That's the 800-pound gorilla of life. Right? And so knowing that, if you think about all of the things, just take a minute and do an inventory.

[11 : 37] What are all of the things that are weighing you down right now? Right? It could be financial stress. You know, it could be job dissatisfaction.

Or maybe you don't have a job and you're wanting a job. It could be stuff about your kids. And maybe they're not doing well. Or maybe they're struggling and you don't know how to help them as their parent. You know?

It could be a major fight or argument that you got into literally this morning. You know? Getting ready for church is really hard. I saw this funny article that said, you know, husband wonders why it takes wife so long to get herself and three kids ready for church.

You know? And I loved it. There's this picture of a guy just sort of sitting on a couch and he was like, it takes me 20 minutes. I don't know what your problem is. Anyway, so time before church can be really stressful.

Right? And so we come in with all these distractions. Now, all those things are weighing you down. All those things are weighing you down. Now, let me ask you this. How many of those things hijack your attention away from Jesus?

[12 : 38] How many of those things are hijacking you and hijacking your attention? And then here's the real question. Is it worth it to you? Is it worth it?

Inattentive blindness. Your attention, your attention is the most precious resource you have. Right? It's more important than money, more important than health, more important even than time.

I would say your attention is your number one resource. And if you're anything like me, it is severely limited. It is a rare and precious thing. And so the question we need to reflect on is how are we spending it?

How are we spending this limited resource that we have? If we want to be prepared for the coming of Jesus, we have to be watchful. We have to pay attention to what matters. That's the first thing I think Jesus wants us to take from this.

But watchfulness requires something else. In order to be watchful, you have to be awake. You have to be wakeful. And so the second thing that we see in this passage is preparing for the coming of Christ means that we have to stay awake.

[13:48] Jesus says in verse 36, stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength. Now is Jesus worried about all of us literally falling asleep like narcoleptics? I don't think so.

That's probably not the primary focus here. So what's this all about? Jesus says this because I think he knows that even Christians, even people who have technically been spiritually awakened, tend to live all of our lives half asleep.

We live half asleep. If you're anything like me, most of the time you avoid, you actively avoid having to actively engage and inhabit your own life.

I will engage as much as I have to and then I will disconnect. And then I will engage and then I will disconnect. That sense of, oh man, you know, I really had to be on tonight.

You know, with those people I really had to be on. You know, I had to be engaged. But the minute, the minute you don't have to be on, the minute you don't have to be engaged, you disconnect. And I think most of us are habituated to spend as much time disconnected as possible.

[14:52] Not present, not inhabiting our lives, but sort of in autopilot mode. You know, we look back over the last month and we say, how is it already December? How is it already Advent?

How is time flying so quickly? And I think the main reason that we feel like time flies is because we stumble along in a haze of unnecessary busyness and vaguely defined anxieties.

I think it's because we anesthetize ourselves with alcohol and with technology. We're sort of half awake. We're half aware. We're not fully present anywhere. We're just sort of spread out, spread thin.

I think of the movie Jungle Book. You know, the snake, Ka? The snake is the embodiment of evil in the Jungle Book.

And the snake wants more than anything to devour Mowgli, the young boy. But notice what Ka does. Ka doesn't attack outright. That would be too obvious.

[15:59] What does Ka do? Ka sings a song. Have you ever listened to the lyrics of that song? Well, trust in me. Just in me. Shut your eyes and trust in me.

You can sleep safe and sound, knowing I'm around. Slip into silent slumber. Sail on a silver mist. Slowly and surely your senses will cease to resist.

That's the form of attack that comes. And listen, I know this is just a movie. But I do believe that the most insidious form of spiritual attack does not come as violence or interpersonal conflict or poverty or even sickness and disease or even death.

I think the most pernicious forms of spiritual attack are the forms of spiritual attack that sing that song to us. That try to convince us.

That try to seduce us to slip into silent slumber until our senses cease to resist. And the reason is it's quite simple.

[17:09] It's because people who have been sedated are spiritually inert, spiritually impotent, spiritually completely inconsequential.

If you're spiritually asleep, if you've been seduced into slumber, your senses are no longer resisting. You're just disengaged as much as possible. Then you're a non-factor.

Nobody has to worry about you. Right? All of the forces mounting against the kingdom of God, they don't have to worry about you anymore. Right? And so, you know, I've been thinking about all this for a long time in my own life.

And, you know, I've taken some steps. You know, I'm trying to regulate alcohol intake. I'm trying to make sure I get enough sleep. You know, I went off social media. You know, and these are things that I didn't go off social media because I believe that social media is inherently evil.

I think technology is neutral. I think it's just technology. Right? And actually, I think that it's an amazing technology. And there are a lot of things that social media does that are incredible for

really connecting people and making movements possible and giving people voices and things like that.

[18:17] But for me, every time I would pick up my phone, I would hear that song. I would hear that song just trying to convince me to go to sleep, to check out, and to escape.

And it's still, still a challenge. It's still a challenge reading the news, not because I want to be informed, but because I just don't want to be present with my kids in the room. Because they're driving me up the wall. And I just want to disconnect for 20 minutes. Right? And so you do that enough and you begin to slip into that silent slumber.

Your resistances go down. You know, and so I thought about that and I said, I don't want to be asleep. You know, I know my life is going to be over in a moment. I know that my life is vapor. You know, and I just realized, you know, that could happen tomorrow. It could happen today. And I want to be awake for every minute of it. You know, I want to be awake for all of the pain and all of the joy and all of the suffering and all of the celebration.

[19:16] I want to be awake for the hard things and the good things. I want to be awake for the famine and the feasting. I want to be present for it. I don't want to look back in 20 years if God allows me to be here that long and think, where did it go?

I want to be awake. You know, so when Jesus says stay awake, I think he's saying for us, beware the seductive, sedating song of life in the modern world.

Because that song is everywhere. So staying awake means vigilantly attending to the presence and the work of God all around us. And that is happening.

Now, we may be looking at the basketball passes. But right in front of our face, God is constantly at work. God's presence is constantly observable.

In letters to Malcolm, C.S. Lewis writes, The world is crowded with God. God walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate.

[20:14] The real labor is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake. Right? Remain awake with your eyes open and your senses sharp and your eyes alert so that you can see the presence and the work of God right in front of you.

I've been reminded over the last couple of weeks in powerful ways. You know, the times when I see God most clearly in my life are the times when I fail. In other words, when I exert all of my skill and all of my learning and all of my credentials and I throw the full force of my resume at a problem. You know, take that, you know. You know, take, you know, 100 million years of schooling and four degrees and, you know, take that. It's like, you know, a pea shooter against a brick wall.

Right? And then I say, well, what happened? I thought that was supposed to work. No, no. You have no power here. And then God says, I'll do it. Step aside. Do we have the eyes to see God doing that in our lives?

Right? Some of the most profound moments in Jesus' earthly ministry, the first moments of his transfiguration, the last moments in the Garden of Gethsemane when he's praying and sweating blood, knowing what's about to come in the form of the cross.

[21:27] These profound moments in Jesus' earthly ministry. The disciples missed. Because they were asleep. They were asleep. And so now the question is, as the resurrected Jesus continues his ministry, how much do we miss because we are asleep?

I don't want to be asleep. I don't want to be asleep for any of this. So Jesus says, keep watch. He says, stay awake. And finally, he says, stand firm.

Stand firm. In ten years of preaching, I've gotten a lot of responses from people. Hands down, one of my most memorable responses from anyone after a service, you know, maybe one of my favorite responses ever, came from an older man who had visited.

It was the first time in Advent he came. He participated in the whole service. At the end of the service, he beelines it over to me, comes up with a big smile on his face, holds out his hand, says, you know, pastor, I just want to tell you how much I enjoyed coming here and how much, how thoroughly I enjoyed your message.

I didn't believe a word of it, but I really enjoyed listening, so thanks so much. And I've always loved that because I'll take honesty any day over sort of empty platitudes and flattery, right?

[22:36] And so I really appreciated his honesty. But the more I've thought about that over the years, I really enjoyed it, didn't believe a word of it. I've thought about that, and I've realized how often I can take the exact same approach to Jesus' words, right?

You know, I spend a lot of time reading and studying the words of Jesus, and I actually really enjoy doing it. I love the time that I get to study and the time that I get to read and reflect on what the word is actually saying.

But then if I walk away from that and you look at my life, it really seems like I don't believe a word of it, right? Now, I don't consciously reject it.

I don't read it and say, that was fun, but I don't believe a word of it. But I think that we live in a kind of information-saturated culture. And I think it's really easy to take all of the blog posts, all of the op-eds, all of the TED Talks, all of the podcasts we listen to, all of the sessions that we have with our counselors and spiritual directors, all of the insights that we receive from our yoga teachers, all of the books on the Enneagram that we've read, and we take all of that along with our own study of Scripture and the biblical preaching and teaching that we receive, and we take all of that and we put it in a big jar on the shelf labeled advice.

Advice, right? And we all have an advice jar. And it's just all the accumulated input we've gotten. And we put it or cram it all in this jar and we keep it so that when we need to make sense of our lives, when we need a little boost of morale, when we're struggling and we need a little encouragement, we can go to the advice jar and pull something out.

[24 : 11] I'm constantly tempted to put the words of Jesus in my advice jar so that they're there if I need them, but otherwise they can just sit on the shelf.

But then Jesus goes and says something like what we see in Luke 21. And just to summarize it, he says, One day I'm going to come again. But I'm not going to come as an infant born in a manger. I'm going to come as a great and terrible conquering king. And I'm going to come and reclaim the world that is rightfully mine. And I'm going to come with a vengeance against those who took it from me.

And on that day, Jesus says, people everywhere are going to be so filled with dread that they will literally pass out. They will literally even die of fear. And then he says, but those who belong to me, they will stand tall.

They will straighten their backs. While everyone else is cowering in the streets, they will raise their eyes to heaven because they will know that the day of their redemption has drawn near. He says there are two kinds of people.

[25 : 19] There are those who are going to die of fear. And those who are going to be filled with hope, lifting their eyes to the heavens. And you read that and you realize, this is not a TED talk.

This is a fire alarm. This demands an immediate response from us. And there are some people who hear the words of Jesus and they reject them outright. I don't believe a word of it.

But I think there are many more of us who hear the words of Jesus and we try to put them in the advice jar. These are words to consider. These are words to contemplate. But nothing more. But remember what Jesus says to the church of Laodicea in Revelation chapter 3.

When Jesus says this to the church, he says, I know your deeds, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

And you read those and you realize, there are those who stand in Christ because they have given their lives to him, because they have held fast to his eternal word, because they've followed him in repentance and faith.

[26 : 27] And there are those who have not. And there is no middle ground. There is no middle ground. So these are the words of Jesus to us so that we would be like those Moken sea gypsy elders on the beaches of Indonesia on that day.

that we would be faithfully vigilant, that we would be rightly oriented toward the world around us, that we would have the eyes to recognize what God is doing right in our midst, to read the signs of the times, specifically that we would keep watch, that we would stay awake, that we would stand firm, so that when Jesus comes again, we would not be taken by surprise, but that we would be ready.

Let's pray. Let's pray.