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Keep Awake!

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Text: Isaiah 62:1-2, 7; Mark 13:33-37 (B-Advent 1)

People of earlier generations, imagining (I suppose) how the end of the world might look, were fearful of volcanoes and earthquakes and eclipses. The very religious among them created stories to try to make sense of such destruction and catastrophe when they saw it. Today we call their attempts to describe the indescribable, *apocalypses*—from the Greek work *apokaluptein* meaning “to uncover” or “disclose”. An apocalypse is a story which seeks to uncover the truth or disclose the meaning behind what surely looks to be the *end of the world*.

Today we do not have to preoccupy ourselves with fanciful images of hellfire and brimstone in order to describe what appears to be the end of *our* world. Already over 100 species a day are disappearing from this planet. Ozone depletion is bringing increased levels of ultraviolet radiation. Entire sections of rain forest are disappearing forever. And the wheels of industry and commerce and wealth-making which fuel this modern apocalypse remain essentially unabated.

One wonders how long we can continue to live as if nothing unusual were happening around us! Certainly the signs are there. Over 100 years ago Karl Marx said, “In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying labour, we find starving and overworking us. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that [people] master nature, [they] seem to become enslaved to other [people] or to [their] own infamy.”¹

Does not the apocalypse of Saint Mark, a story some 2000 years old, now take on fresh meaning for own generation? Listen:

In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Humanity coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then 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. . . . So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. . . . Take heed, watch. . . for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he comes suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch! (Mark 13:24–37).

Do you remember that familiar photo from outer space in which a fragile blue earth floats in a dark and threatening universe? Today the apocalypse—that final end—seems to loom menacingly. We see it every day in the potential destruction of the environment and the disappearance of countless species from our planet. And why? Because of one species' relentless drive to buy, sell, barter and trade. For in terms of managing planet earth, is it not true that (through that most cherished of human institutions, capitalism) we are squandering a priceless inheritance for a handful of gold?

Isaiah speaks of the *iniquity of the nations*. "O Lord, why dost thou make us err from thy ways and harden our heart, so that we see thee not? . . . O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down. . . that the nations might tremble at thy presence! For thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities" (Isaiah 62:1, 2, 7).

The iniquity of the nations! Someone said that "even if every company on the planet were to adopt the environmental and social practices of the best companies [such as The Body Shop, Nabob and Dowbrands Canada] the world would still be moving toward environmental degradation and collapse."² Is the time come to barricade ourselves in our houses? Do we flee to the mountains?

I know there are some who say the time has come for that. But that is not what scripture says. Mark's gospel tells us to "Be alert!" Jesus (in Mark's gospel) tells us to "Be ready!"

Not so that we might catch a glimpse of the carnage—but that we might catch sight of, and participate in, the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. Listen again:

In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then—*then—they will see the Son of Humanity coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then 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...* So when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. Take heed, watch... for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you I say to all: WATCH!

The power of an apocalyptic story is that in it the end of the world and the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God are described anew in every generation. As the church of Jesus Christ in this generation, therefore, let us be watchful. Let us even prepare for the in-breaking of the Kingdom by confessing the names of the powers and principalities that prowl around like a roaring lion seeking to devour. And let the first confession be this: “Because corporations are the dominant institution on the planet, they must squarely face the social and environmental problems that afflict humankind.”³

There! We have spoken. But before we become overwhelmed with what seems an insurmountable task, let us pause a moment to give thanks, knowing that because the larger church has been speaking for a few years, many companies are drawing up new codes of conduct for corporate life that integrate social, ethical and environmental concerns. We can celebrate this.

But let us not become too comfortable, lest the master of the household arrive suddenly and find us sleeping. Remember the words of Christ, “What I say to you, I say to *all* of you. Watch!” After all, is it not our great love for convenience that is behind the relentless problems of waste disposal on this planet? How do we really throw away a car, or a stereo? Where do the materials come from to make the new ones we demand?

So let us continue to be vigilant. And as we wait and watch, let us be aware that German and Japanese manufacturers (at

their government's insistence) are even today experimenting with the *renting* of stereos, automobiles and televisions rather than the selling of them. This means that these new products always belong to the manufacturer and one day have to be returned. When companies know that their product will come back, and cannot be thrown away, a very different approach to design and manufacture comes into play. So also does corporate respect for meager natural resources.

So we keep alert to conspicuous consumption—and remember too that our money has voting power. Our speaking out does not stop when we refuse to buy a Mitsubishi stereo because of that company's participation in the destruction of primary forests in Malaysia. Rather, our speaking continues, when, with many concerned citizens and many Christian churches, we send Mitsubishi one postcard per week encouraging them to consider other options in the production of their products. It is confession and forgiveness on a corporate level. And when our postcards are posted, let us consider—each of us—ways in which we, ourselves, can consume less, for confession and forgiveness includes everyone. As individuals and families let us decide how we can live with fewer material possessions. “For of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven...”

And perhaps most importantly, let us not forget that the earth we call home, and everything here, belongs to God. While it is tragic the average adult can recognize one thousand brand names and logos, but fewer than ten local plants, let us give thanks that many children in many homes and classrooms today are learning to know, not just the names, but the nutritional value of plants that naturally grow along city streets and in vacant lots.

So let us keep in our hearts (with humility and respect) the image of a fragile blue planet floating in the darkness of space. And let us cherish it, remembering it was as long ago as 1566 that Francis Borgia sent his son the remarkable gift of a globe, to which his son replied in thanks, “Before seeing it, I had not realized how small the world is.”⁴

It is a small world. It is a beautiful world. But the time to rejoice fully is not here yet. The threat of apocalypse (the “desolating sacrilege”, to use the language of Mark) is still upon

us. But it is not yet time to flee to the mountains either. It is time to keep alert. Time to shop for Nabob products and avoid Mitsubishi products a little bit longer. Time to write our government representatives and company presidents. And above all it is time to pray for this world. Time to care passionately about plants and compost and what happens when we throw something away. And it is time to consume less. So beware! Keep awake! Watch! For you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cock-crow, or in the morning—but come he will. And at his coming the new heaven and the new earth will be revealed—*revealed, not through the destruction of the old, but through its glorious salvation.*

Amen.

Notes

- ¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.
- ² Paul Hawkin, *Utne Reader*, Sept/Oct 1993, 55.
- ³ Ibid. 54.
- ⁴ Peter Timmerman, *Compass*, Sept/Oct 1993, 23.