

“Those Who Dream ... Keep Awake” Mark 13:24-37; Isaiah 64:1-9
Rev. Michele Ward November 29, 2020 First Sunday of Advent Brown
Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

Has anyone heard of the Chinese term revenge bedtime procrastination lately?¹ It has picked up more traffic on Chinese social media lately due to the pandemic. Allow me to describe it to you. It is close to your usual time on a weeknight to get ready for bed. Instead, you do not fall asleep. You continue to scroll through the latest news on your phone or computer, continue to watch television, continue to listen to a podcast. You have no reason to stay up--and yet, you do. Sleep scientists have typically chalked up this kind of behavior to insomnia or low self-discipline, but this phenomenon is increasing during the months of the pandemic.

The literal meaning of the Chinese term revenge bedtime procrastination is “suffering through the night vengefully.” It essentially describes a trend of wakefulness that modern day people develop as a way to seize some control by taking back the night. School and work often demand 8-10 hours a day, even during a pandemic. Staying up late is the only time the hours of our days are up to us. In this flawed logic, going to bed on time just gives more time away, so why not stay up and do whatever we want to do?

Our Advent theme this season is titled “Those Who Dream,” and my sermon focuses on the concept of keeping awake. When I thought about how to apply this theme to our text this morning, I couldn’t help but think of revenge bedtime procrastination and other poor sleep hygiene habits. This morning, I am not talking about suffering through the night vengefully, insomnia, or self-discipline. Isaiah does not go into detail about those! Instead, the prophet describes something equally challenging: hope. He describes being fully awake, fully aware, fully anticipatory. This is what hope looks like for the nation of Israel that Isaiah describes close to the end of this chapter.

Now, the first seven verses of this prayer do not sound very hopeful. They sound like they are full of lament and regret. This prayer opens up with asking God to rip open the heavens and come down to earth! They are so desperate for connection with God that they want to see the old signs and wonders of the exodus--the wandering in the wilderness with Moses. They want the mountains to shake at God’s presence, fires that are so strong they make the waters of the earth boil--this sounds like a frightening and powerful God. They want God to be so clearly present that no lingering doubts exist that God’s power is with them. The nation of Israel is no longer in exile in the last ten chapters, but are doing the hard work of “reshaping the community of faith after its long, exilic

¹ Daphne Lee, “How “Revenge Bedtime Procrastination” Explains Modern Life,” July 9, 2020. <https://greatist.com/discover/revenge-bedtime-procrastination>

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jeopardy,”² according to Walter Brueggeman. They are in the process of returning to Israel and are asking questions about who they will be, what their nation will be like, how they will relate to God. They acknowledge that God honors those who wait for them, those who do right. They acknowledge their faithfulness to God in this midst of their exile in foreign lands such as Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. And yet, they are full of self-contempt, which we can hear in verses that describe their sinful habits and how far away they feel from God. They describe God’s anger towards them and their sinfulness. Like revenge bedtime procrastination, this kind of revenge is about harming themselves--they describe themselves as ‘unclean’ and ‘filthy.’ The prayer even says their sin has weakened them to the point that they fade away like dry, dead leaves. Isaiah goes so far to admit that they no longer call out to or hold on to God because God is no longer there. God has left them to their own devices. God has given up on Israel, hiding their face from Israel.

Yet.

Yet.

Yet.

The hope in this prayer hinges on this small, three letter word. Do you see the turn? Do you feel it as you listen? Do you hear it?

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.”

The prophet Isaiah declares the hopeful of keeping awake here--of being fully present to God. God is their creator, our creator. God is their potter, our potter. We are the creation, we are the clay. We are God’s handiwork. We are all God’s people.

This prayer declares multiple realities at once. This prayer outlines the contradictions of the life of faith. Isaiah admits guilt. Isaiah is honest about trouble. The prophet even implies that God abandoned them and is to blame for some of it. These are justification enough to give up on a relationship with

² Introduction, page 3, Walter Brueggemann, Isaiah 40-66 Bible Commentary.

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God. To stop praying and stop believing. God has visibly failed, so why continue to pray and to believe?

Israel prays in an astounding way. They are deeply bound to God, and God is bound to them. In spite of how they feel about God leaving them and how desperately they want God to appear to them in signs and wonders, they still identify themselves as the creation. They admit their reliance upon God. They admit that God fashioned them and they need God. They call themselves God’s people.

This prayer is full of the contradictions of hope. God belongs to them, and they belong to God. They know that God has done great things in the past, and God will do them again. This prayer mysteriously ends in a hopeful reminder of the interdependent relationship God has with creation and creation has with God.

God has done and will do great things again.

Yet.

Yet.

Yet.

God is not coming in fire. God is not coming to shake the mountains. God is coming in the form of a vulnerable baby that needs us to take care of him. God is coming as Jesus Christ to meet us in the painful rebuilding of our world, the world God invites us to create.