Almighty God, as we begin this season of Advent remind us again that in the midst of our darkness you are bringing us peace, peace to calm our anxious spirits and hectic lives. Turn our hearts again toward you. Make us ready to receive your Son our Savior. Slow our pace, give us the blessing of your peace, and open our hearts to hear your call once again. For we ask this in Jesus’ precious Name. AMEN.

“Nothing to be done.” This frustrating line in the opening scene of the play Waiting for Godot characterizes much of the work’s storyline and plot. In Samuel Beckett’s absurdist play, two men, Estragon and Vladimir, sit together through two acts, aimlessly waiting for a man named Godot. Throughout the play, they try one activity after another in order to avoid boredom and to pass the time while they wait. Their boredom is actually becoming so intense that they entertain thoughts of suicide. To be honest, when I first read this play I didn’t get it. And I found it difficult not to become bored along with the characters. I’m still not sure that I really get Beckett’s point, but needless to say, these two men make an impression with their pointless waiting. Whoever Godot is, he doesn’t provide Estragon or Vladimir much relief from the boredom of their own lives.

Waiting is the theme of the season of Advent, and it’s heavily present in today’s Gospel lesson. In Mark, chapter 13 the disciples are gathered around Jesus, asking him questions about the future. Borrowing language from Old Testament prophecy and history, Jesus tells them to watch for certain signs and to be wary of those who will come to lead them astray. He warns them that they will be judged and
persecuted for following him, and he gives them advice about the coming months and days. Because this text is placed soon before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, most likely Jesus is preparing his disciples for the grief of the days and weeks immediately ahead. But in doing so, he offers his disciples alarming visions that would make anyone nervous.

Within these visions, the disciples are also given clear instruction from Jesus to keep awake, to be aware, to pay attention to all that will come to pass. Like a manager heading out on a journey, Jesus will soon leave the disciples in charge, and he expects them to keep watch while he is away. After all, he will return, and their task is to watch for him and care for everything in his absence.

Stop for a moment and put yourself in the disciples’ shoes. Jesus has just given you some pretty confusing and disturbing images, delivered even more unclear instructions to you, and you’re told to pay attention to all these details. But with these alarming images and hints of Jesus’ departure, you can’t help but find yourself more confused. Just what is it that we’re supposed to be waiting for when Jesus returns?

In the women’s Bible study, we’ve spent a lot of time trying to figure out the answer to this question. In our study of Revelation, we’ve been learning about visions like this one in Mark 13, trying to understand the meaning behind these apocalyptic images. Scholars and authors have made a lot of money convincing people that language like that in Revelation and the apocalyptic language here in Mark was written to strike fear in our hearts. They’ve taught us to fear the return of Christ and to spread that fear to our neighbors. Many have also thought they themselves could predict when Jesus’ return would actually happen. However, because this is scholarship that Presbyterians don’t trust, and teachings that we don’t follow, the topic of Jesus’ return rightly remains a mystery to us. And so we’re often left with the question: what is it, then, that we’re waiting for?

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.
In this passage from Mark, Jesus borrows from the Old Testament prophets. If you want to make a point, if you want people to pay attention, paint the story as exaggerated as you can. In reading or hearing this text, we can’t help but feel the urgency in Jesus’ message. To quote the author Kathleen Norris, “During Advent the voices of the prophets come through loud and clear. In preparing us for the coming of God in human form, God calls out the big guns to get our attention.”

But Jesus isn’t alone in this kind of approach. This is what news anchors, politicians, philanthropists, and authors do all the time. As Michael quoted from Flannery O’Connor last Sunday, “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind, you draw large and startling figures.” In order to get our attention, in order to get us to act, these people paint a scene that is as exaggerated, as critical, and as urgent as it can be. In order for us to believe that the crisis they are describing is the one we must attend to most, they try to scare us into believing in their cause.

The difference here in Mark is that Jesus is not calling us to panic. Although he describes the scene using dramatic imagery, Jesus is not calling us to abject fear. Apocalypse is meant to reveal, to show us that which we might ignore, or to offer us good news in the midst of a difficult situation. As Jesus is heading to the cross, he is calling his disciples to keep awake and pay attention. They will soon see him crucified, and the days ahead will be frightening.

Although alarming and disturbing, the apocalyptic visions of Revelation, of the prophets, and here also in Mark are meant to give us hope, to give everyone good news, faith in something better than our current world. Despite all the supposed “scholars” who’ve tried to convince us otherwise, Jesus’ return is not something we should be scared of. It’s not something that should panic us or frighten us into believing. The theme of this passage is watchfulness, not fear.

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One of my favorite books for my daughter, and for any child of the church, is by Virginia Kroll and Debra Jenkins. Its title is *I Wanted to Know All About God*. In it a young child begins the story saying, “I wanted to know all about God, so I went out looking for God in signs of his creation.” Page after page the child sees God moving and acting in her world, her friends, and her family. On one page she says, “I wondered if God is strong, and the ocean roared in my ears,” and in another place she notices, “I wanted to know what colors God likes. Then I met several children of other races.” Reflecting on her friendships, she says, “I wondered if God’s people have faith in each other, and my friend trusted me with a secret.” Throughout the story, the narrator sees God in every flower, in every creature, and in every face she comes in contact with. As children usually do, she pays attention to the details, finding those pleasurable things that we, adults, often ignore. She notices every aspect, and she connects the goodness and wonder of her world with God’s handiwork.

This is the kind of attentiveness and waiting we are called to bring to Advent. Rather than respond in fear to Jesus’ teaching, we are called to faithful watchfulness. This kind of watchfulness pulls us out of our ordinary, routine, and often difficult lives and into a recognition of what Christ is doing among us. In Advent, while we wait and prepare for the return of Christ, we are called to pay attention, open our eyes, and see Christ at work all around us. Advent keeps us from becoming like the two men in *Waiting for Godot*—by paying attention to the good gifts that await us—and that surround us—we move from aimless waiting to purposeful watchfulness. We open our eyes to Christ at work. As we attend to Christ’s movement, we’re called to join in his message of peace, reconciliation, and justice.

In our waiting, with new eyes shaped by the calling of Advent, we could write our own story of faithfulness during this season:

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This Advent, I wanted to grow closer to Christ, so I went out paying attention to his work in the world.

I wondered what God’s voice sounds like, and the prophets in Scripture talked about God’s call.

I wanted to know what kind of music God likes, and I heard the prayers and songs of Advent.

I wanted to know more about God’s justice, and I gave one of my many coats to my neighbor.

I wondered if Jesus hears our prayers, and someone held my hand when I was scared.

I wondered what a celebration with Jesus would be like, and I laughed and feasted with friends and family around the table.

What are we waiting for? Friends, we know what we’re waiting for. We’re waiting for good news, for hope, for love to become so evident that there is no other reality. We’re waiting for Christ’s return to shatter once and for all the brokenness of our world. But in our waiting, we are called to prepare. Unlike the sad characters in Waiting for Godot, our waiting is not senseless or aimless—it has purpose and meaning, conviction and truth. We wait with watchfulness and alertness; we wait knowing the end of the story and trusting that that end will redeem the present. When our waiting is over, there will be celebration. When the manager of the land comes home, when the owner returns, there is excitement and there is a party. And that party celebrates all that is good, honorable, just, and loving in God’s world. And these are the things we watch for while we wait. With purpose, in Advent, we are called to stay alert for all that God is doing in this world.

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Therefore, brothers and sisters: what are we waiting for? Keep alert, pay attention, and wait—knowing that Christ is coming to make all things new.

Thanks be to God. Amen.