

St. Andrew's UMC  
November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Mark 1:3:24-37  
"Therefore Keep Awake"

Did you take the advantage of the Black Friday? I did. I took my son to a store and used the \$30 dollar coupon to buy him the belated birthday present. It was a pocket hard drive that has a storage capacity of 320 gigabytes. It is a wee bit bigger than an iPod. It is amazing how small these things are getting, as the years go by. I remember my first hard drive was 1 megabyte big. It was 2 inches thick, and almost a square foot-wide.

Anyway, I have seen the TV commercials announcing that such and such department store is going to open its doors on Thanksgiving Day at 2 AM. Another will open rather late, at 5 AM. They would stay open until 1 PM. I wondered, who would want to rise that early on Thanksgiving Day to dedicate one's precious slumber time to the gods of shopping? What about the employees who must come to work on Thanksgiving Day that early? They do have families of their own, don't they?

That was nothing, however, compared to what I saw in the news. One of the discount department stores in Long Island , NY , suburb expected to have a door-busting sale on Black Friday, at 5 AM. Shortly after 5 AM, the crowd could not wait for the door to open, and according to the police report, they "physically broke down the doors, knocking [the employee] to the ground." Then the literally door-busting crowd trampled the employee who died one hour later in the hospital.

What is it like for the family to cope with this sort of death? First of all, the particular discount department store is not known for its great working condition or pay. Second of all, to rise so early in the morning, to go to work for the little pay, only to be trampled to death by a crazed crowd that had nothing better to do than getting up at 4 AM, just to get to the store ahead of other crazed people—it is very difficult for me to put a meaning to the cost of a human life. I question, what is the worth of a human life?

Maybe, these were not so crazy people. Maybe these were just like the neighbors next door, or the co-workers at work. They were moms and pops with growing children, just like we are or we used to be, perhaps. They were just trying to buy some clothes for their kids.

They were probably just regular folk who only wanted to save a few precious bucks in hard times.

Nevertheless, their simple desire to save money caused the death of a person. How is it difference from, say, the policy of an insurance company that denies the coverage for a patient with a terminal illness? It was only trying to save a few bucks!

For those shoppers, each one of them had made a willful choice to be there. Just being there on time was not good enough. They had to be there *before* other shoppers. Otherwise, the good stuffs would have been picked clean by the time they reached the aisle. In order to beat the crowd, they had to plan to get up so much earlier than usual. They probably set the alarm clock. Maybe they had skipped the breakfast, too. It would only show how dedicated they were for the given purpose.

Then one might wonder, what other activities get people out of the bed that early? The survey said: Fishing? Golfing? Going to the airport? To read the scriptures and pray, just like any dedicated Muslim person would?

Actually, I looked up on the internet, and for the Muslims who live in San Francisco area, the first prayer begins at 5:48 AM. Those shoppers had to be even more hardcore than the dedicated Muslims.

Do you think you would find a Muslim at Macy's, 5:00 o'clock in the morning? You know, Muslims are more religious than most Christians—they pray six times a day at set times—about six times more than some Christians.

What I am saying is that every one of those door-busting shoppers was there, because each one intended to be there, and each one executed one's plan. What I am saying is that the door-busting shoppers demonstrated that they were capable of the materialistic

discipline that surpassed the spiritual discipline of the dedicated, religious people.

Now we need to hear what Jesus is saying:

Mark 13:35-37 **“Therefore, 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”**

Jesus is speaking in the metaphor in this passage. One may be fully awake, but one could be asleep, according to this metaphor. Then how do we judge if one is metaphorically asleep?

Well, one must take note the disparity in the text of the Gospel first. Jesus said that **“this generation will not pass away until all these things had taken place.”** Jesus seems to have believed that the end of time he described to his listeners would consummate in the contemporary generation. We know for a fact it did not. Maybe, Jesus was mistaken. Maybe, Jesus could not emphasize more.

What material difference does it make to us, if Jesus never shows up in our life time? Are we Christians, because we are just afraid of getting caught when he unexpectedly returns? Or, are we Christians, because we are committed to the justice and righteousness of the kingdom of Heaven?

There have been many sects whose leaders preyed on the believers of this teaching about the end of time, when Jesus would return in clouds with great power and glory, surrounded by the angels. The angels will then gather the elect from everywhere, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heaven (one might want to note that Jesus is relying here on the cosmology that assumes that the earth is flat).

It is not wrong to teach people that Jesus would return, but it is wrong to teach the precise time. They do it anyway, so they could control their followers. The same Jesus clearly says here:

13:32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

The followers of these sects are not stupid. Yet they absorb this kind of teaching that pinpoints the time when the Master would return. I can only conclude that people swallowed this kind of teaching, because they wanted to. They put their hearts into it. They wanted it to happen in their life time. So they believed it.

Usually people focus on the exact time Jesus would be returning. But the point is not when the Master is returning, but whether the slaves will be prepared for his return.

The kingdom of Heaven demands from those who plan to enter a certain degree of fitness. Not every random person can enter the kingdom of Heaven, as they would a discount department store at 5 AM on Black Friday. One needs to prepare oneself, in order to become fit for the kingdom of Heaven. Similarly, waiting for the Master to return means having been prepared for his return. The household must stay in order, and the business must be running as smoothly as when the master is home.

Do you have three days' supply of food and water, in case a disaster strikes? Those who live in the mountains, it is for the forest fire. For those who live in the flood plain, it is for the flood. For those of us who live near the fault line, it is for the earthquake.

You keep your important papers in one place. You have batteries, flashlights, extra clothing, etc. You have your food and water supplies for a few days. You do not know when the next one will hit. It may or may not. But you are prepared. If you are not, this week is the good time to do so. I'd better get on with it, too. I know I have to, but I just do not get around to it. The brain knows, but the body does not follow.

Staying asleep is like being unprepared for the return of the Master. Staying asleep is like not trying to become fit to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Staying asleep is like not having been prepared for the disaster. Staying asleep is, therefore, a failure to put into practice

what you know and what you should do. It is the consequence of either a willful choice or the willful negligence.

If we would tune into what Jesus is saying, he is not really talking about the disaster the returning master would find. Jesus is talking about the spiritual health, about the spiritual fitness for the kingdom. And without this spiritual health, it would be like getting oneself caught in the middle of a disaster. We must realize, however, that the spiritual health is the consequence of our willful choice.

You can tell one's spiritual health is not good, when one is perfectly willing to get out of the bed at 4 AM to beat other bargain hunters on Black Friday, but won't even stir for a few minutes of time for a prayer. People do make willful choices where and how they would spend their energy.

Sometimes, religious people should willingly miss some bargains, precisely because they are religious. It is difficult to pretend to be religious, while exploiting every single bargain available. Such an exploit would reveal plenty that one is thoroughly secular within, regardless of which garb of religion he or she wears.

Sometimes, religious people should willingly and willfully give up on certain things, even if it means a loss. A religious person should be keenly aware where serving God ends and where serving mammon begins. That would show how alert a Christian disciple is. That is the spiritual alertness that Jesus is talking about.

Do we have time to criticize other religions, sects, or denominations for their outward teachings, when we have difficulty rising for a few minutes of a morning prayer? Others may not have our critical eyes or superior perspectives; but do we have the spiritual substance? Do we have the inner strength? Can we overcome trials and temptations? Can we even start our worship on time?

What informs our decisions, and what drives us to behave in particular ways? If the secular people could not tell by looking at the way Christians treat the cashiers, retail clerks, and all others whose pay is small and whose job security is next to nil, how will the Christians themselves know that they are actually awake?

If I am not aware of what informs my decisions and what drives my behaviors, how can I tell I am indeed awake?

Whether Jesus returns in my life time or in other's life time is immaterial to my spiritual health. Which one of us maintains one's health, just to show the doctor what healthy diet he has been eating, and how diligently he has been working out? Every one of us knows we maintain our health, so that we could enjoy our own lives. Are we watching out, are we not crying, are we not pouting, so that we could inform Jesus when he comes in great power and glory how good we have been? Well, Jesus is not the Santa.

Just as doctors are there to serve our needs, Jesus is there to help us become better: keep awake, so that you would enjoy its consequence—enjoying your lives.

We keep awake, so that we could have our spiritual life, and have it abundantly.