

December 3, 2017
Mark 13:24-37
Christ's Last Lecture
Michael Stanfield

‘But in those days, after that suffering, 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. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. 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.

‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, 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 until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. 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.’ *The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Redeemer, Amen.*

Keep awake and wait. That’s one way to summarize the last lecture of Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

When Professors at Carnegie Mellon retire, or leave to go elsewhere, they are sometimes asked to give a “last lecture.” These lectures are not just on the subjects in which the professors have expertise but are an opportunity to impart wisdom on those attending.

Pausch delivered *his* final lecture there in September of 2007, right after he had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer.

Pausch expected maybe 150 people to attend this last lecture. After all, it was a warm September day, and he assumed that people would have better things to do than attend a final lesson from a dying computer science professor in his 40s. He bet a friend \$50 that he would never fill the 400-seat auditorium.

Well, Pausch lost that bet. The room was packed, and when he arrived on stage, he received a standing ovation. He motioned for the audience of students and colleagues to sit down. “Make me earn it,” he said.

According to columnist Jeffrey Zaslow, of the New York Times, Pausch barely mentioned his

cancer in the course of his 70-minute lecture. Instead, he took everyone on an exhilarating and riveting journey through the great lessons of his life. He talked about the importance of childhood dreams, and the stamina needed to overcome obstacles. “Brick walls are there for a reason,” he insisted, showing slides of the rejection letters he had received over the years. “They let us prove how badly we want things.”

He pushed his audience to show patience toward others, saying, “Wait long enough, and people will surprise and impress you... Find the best in everybody... You might have to wait a long time, sometimes years, but people will show you their good side. Just keep waiting no matter how long it takes. No one is all evil... Everybody was created in God’s image which means everyone has a good side; just keep waiting and keep loving, and it will come out.”

He celebrated his mentors and his students with an open heart, and revealed the depth of his love for his family on the eve of his death. “As we await the cataclysm of death, keep awake.” That’s what Pausch seemed to be saying as he invited his audience to rethink their ambitions and find new ways to look at other people’s flaws and abilities. “Keep awake to what is truly important in life.”

After the lecture, Pausch’s only plan was to spend his remaining days with his family. But a video of his talk went viral on the internet and Pausch was soon receiving e-mails from people around the world, telling him that his lecture had inspired them to spend more time with loved ones, quit pitying themselves, and even resist suicidal urges. Terminally ill people were inspired to embrace their own goodbyes, and have fun with every day they had left. ***Randy Pausch’s last lecture really woke people up.***

He was invited to give part of his talk to *Oprah Winfrey*. ABC News then named him one of its three “Persons of the Year.” And that’s when people began urging Randy to write a book. He resisted this at first, since he wanted to spend time with his family. But since he needed to exercise, and had to be alone as he rode his bike, he began to use his daily rides as a time to reflect on his lecture, his life and his dreams for his family.

And so, for an hour each day, he would talk to his future co-author through a cell-phone headset; and over the course of 53 long bike rides he shared the insights that became the book called *The Last Lecture*.

Keep awake and wait. That’s what Randy Pausch says to us; it’s what Jesus says to us as well.

On Friday, July 25, 2008, Pausch died of cancer at the age of 47.

And not long after Jesus spoke the words of today’s text, he was also dead. That’s right. The Last Lecture of Jesus Christ, given to disciples only hours from his execution, is found in today’s reading, Mark 13.

In it, he challenges them to keep awake for a possible second coming, an earth-shaking event which will occur at an undetermined time. He promises that he will return as the Son of Man, with “great power and glory” to gather his people from the ends of the earth, and bring them into his kingdom.

The disciples understood the grave threats surrounding these cosmic shifts. But perhaps the real danger was that the disciples would miss what really mattered until then – the fact that Jesus was already with them – because they were too distracted by the assorted demands of day-to-day life.

So Jesus says to them, “Keep awake”.

We face the same challenge in our time – especially as we enter the season of Advent and begin our march through the wild weeks known as the “holidays” that lie ahead. Jesus is going to be coming to us and we need to be ready.

He’ll be coming to us this Advent through the eternal words of Scripture that will be read and interpreted: “Heaven and earth will pass away,” says Jesus this morning, “but my words will not pass away”.

He’ll be coming to us this Advent through a community that knows and practices his everlasting love, a community that He reminds us today stretches “from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven”.

Eventually he will be coming to us in a cosmic upheaval. The challenge for us is to “keep awake” when, on the one hand, Jesus is already present, while on the other, he has not yet come for that great day of reckoning.

We begin our wake-up call *by listening carefully to the words of Jesus*, words that can be hard to hear in the middle of the noise of the holidays.

Randy Pausch took time to leave specific words of counsel for his children, saying, “If I could give three words of advice, they would be, ‘Tell the truth.’ If I got three more words, I’d add, ‘All the time.’”

These are good words and hard to follow because, in a world of lies, truth tellers suffer. Maybe that’s why Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”.

We live in a time filled with lies – with widespread corruption, abuse of power and the threat of the destruction of the great institutions of religion, freedom and democracy. As we begin Advent this year, *we* are called to self-denying truth-telling.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” says Jesus. Real energy, real power and real joy are to be found in service to others. It’s an important reminder as we enter the ever-increasing complexity of what has become known nationwide simply as “the holiday season” – one in which we always seem to schedule more, do more, buy more.

But then Jesus then goes on to say, “...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Receive Jesus, *Receive Advent* with a vulnerable, childlike attitude – an attitude of dreaming, an attitude of wonder, an attitude, most of all of hope – the stubborn hope of the child who has been stiffed by his absent father a hundred times, but still waits on the curb

because that father has promised again to come.

Stanley Hauerwas is a renowned biblical scholar. He has written a great deal about hope. And in his fascinating book, *A Community of Character*, he writes about the centrality of hope in Christian faith. But the hope he is talking about is not the shallow hope for material goods, as in, “I hope I get a car for Christmas.” No, Hauerwas marries hope to patience. He writes,

“Hope without patience results in the illusion of optimism or, more terrifying, the desperation of fanaticism. The hope necessary to initiate us into the adventure (of Christ’s way) must be schooled by patience if the adventure is to be sustained. Through patience, we learn to continue hope, even though our hope seems to offer little chance of fulfillment.”

But Hauerwas notes that patience also requires hope, “... for without hope,” he writes, “patience too easily accepts the world and the self for what it is, rather than what it can or should be.”

Sheila Walsh writes in *The Women of Faith Daily Devotional* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002, 24).

With Christ our hope lay in something that is beyond this life – which brings to mind a story that a friend of mine recently relayed to me.

She says, late one night as she waited for the elevator in the lobby of her hotel, she saw a friend standing with her back to her. She hadn’t seen her in ages and was so glad for the opportunity to say hello. They hugged and chatted about the day. Then her friend asked her if she had heard the news.

“What news?” she asked, looking into her eyes for some sense of what she was about to tell her.

“I’m pregnant,” she said. Now, that kind of news is usually followed by screams of delight — but not if you and your husband carry a rare gene that makes it impossible for your child to reach his or her first birthday.

And this friend of my friend and her husband had already buried a child. They had taken every precaution to make sure this would never happen again, but they conceived anyway. My friend’s friend had already undergone testing, and this baby would be born with the same rare illness that had claimed their first daughter.

So my friend and her friend wept together. But my friend relayed to me that even as she saw *her* friend’s anguish, she was struck with the amazing peace and grace that rested on her.

“If this life was all we had, I would have no hope at all,” she said. “But I have a living hope that this is just the rehearsal for our real life.”

We stand together these days in what can often feel like a pretty hopeless time. But Advent is about looking beyond the pain of this broken world to one where there will be no more tears. We are not a people of a human lifespan only; through Christ, we are a people of eternity.

Finally, Jesus instructs us that it’s also important for us to *remain connected to the community* that Jesus intends to gather when he returns.

Christian faith is a team sport, not an individual activity, so it's critically important for us to get together for worship, service, learning, fellowship and fun.

Randy Pausch continued to stay connected to friends throughout his illness — they joked around and made fun of each other, even in the face of death.

On a short scuba-diving vacation, Randy put on sunscreen and a friend said, "Afraid of skin cancer, Randy? That's like putting good money after bad."

Remaining connected, in community. That's the best position to be in, if we want to be ready whenever and however Christ decides to show up – living in a way that is in line with his.

"I am maintaining my clear-eyed sense of the inevitable," says Randy Pausch. "I'm living like I'm dying. But at the same time, I'm very much living like I'm still living."

As he battled cancer, Randy knew about the importance of using time wisely. "At this point," he said, "I'm an authority on what to do with limited time."

In fact, according to the May 26, 2008 issue of *Newsweek*, Randy had hooked three monitors to his PC, in order to maximize his electronic workspace. He put uncomfortable chairs in his office to keep visitors from lingering. And he stood up while talking on the phone, as an incentive to finish calls quickly. Needless to say, Randy stayed awake!

He was wide awake, with a clear-eyed sense of the inevitable. And we should be the same, living every day as though it were our last day on earth, doing our best to trust Christ and love God and neighbor. The fact is we don't know when our lives will end, just as we don't know the dawn of Christ's coming. The best approach is to be alert to Christ's will, living each day with faith and love and a spirit of service and connection.

Writer, Claudia Shiftlet was once, like Randy Pausch, diagnosed with breast cancer. She was at the end of her chemo treatments and was completely bald. In her book, *Practicing Spirituality During Illness* she writes:

"I want to share a moment of deep healing that I experienced. When I lost my hair from chemo, I let it all go one day while walking outside of my house. It was the beginning of spring. My hair just blew away from my head as I ran my fingers through it. I wept for my loss.

"But then back at my house, several weeks later, I noticed a nest being built on the portal of the house I shared. Looking closer, I saw clumps of my own hair in the nest. I wept aloud for this symbol of hope. My lost hair was part of a nest for nurturing new life. This was not a cure, yet it was an experience of deep spiritual healing. Christ had come." Claudia, in an e-mail posting to the Practice Circle of the Spirituality & Practice online course, "Practicing Spirituality During Illness," 5/5/08, spiritualityandpractice.com/community/thread.php?id=2025. Retrieved May 5, 2008.

How do we prepare for Advent? We receive Jesus, with childlike faith. We remain connected, in community. We live every day as though it were our last day on earth, in line with Christ's will

and way.

That's the lecture of a lifetime. Class dismissed. The idea for and portions of this sermon come from Homilectics Magazine, October, November, December, 2008 edition.

Let us pray. O Lord we live in scary times that are reminiscent of Christ's warnings of the end. Give us the hope that he instilled in his disciples as he faced his death. And let that hope take root in joyful service to others and in celebrations of our connection to one another in Christ.

Now bless these gifts that they, like Claudia's discarded hair might nurture new life. We pray in Christ's name, amen.