

# The Benefits of Doing Nothing

Mark 13:24-37

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on November 30, 2020

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Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to do nothing. This cliché has taken on new meaning during this Covid year. Good heavens is it hard to do nothing. This pandemic feels like we are on a long road trip in that it is both boring and life-threatening at the same time. Time is warped inside the car driving down the barrel of interstate highway after highway. It is shorter than normal and longer than normal and before long you have to pee again. And it's only when you stop that you realize you have been gradually increasing the tightness of your grip on the steering wheel for hours now, the low-grade anxiety of passing semi-truck after semi-truck has accumulated in your shoulders and even though you have practically been doing nothing you are so, so tired. Boring and life-threatening.

Be alert! Keep awake! says Jesus sounding like a worried parent on the phone to their road-tripping college student. This is Jesus' closing advice at the end of a very long and fairly terrifying sermon he gives from the Mount of Olives, which we read today on the first Sunday of Advent. We're dropped right into the middle of the it. These are Jesus' final words before he enters Jerusalem for the last time to be crucified and die.

Be alert! Keep awake! This is exactly the kind of advice that is the opposite of helpful when one is on a road trip. Thinking about needing to stay awake does very little for keeping one awake. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is nothing. It must have felt like very strange advice to give the disciples at this moment in the story. Because, quite frankly, it feels like the world is ending. Jesus has just prophesied the downfall of the temple in Jerusalem and with it the entire governmental system of the Roman-occupied Israel that they lived in. Jesus has, in other words, upset the most powerful political figures of his world, both Jewish and Roman, and to the disciples it looks like all the momentum this Jesus movement has been gaining in these three short years might all of the sudden be in jeopardy.

This is usually the moment where the charismatic leader gathers their troops, gives a motivational speech about "leaving it all on the field," and then charges forth Braveheart style to fight their enemy to the death. Only Jesus' doesn't say that. Just before our reading for today, Jesus instructs his followers "When you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be i.e. when the Romans destroy the temple, then those in Judea must flee to the mountains." Don't fight, in other words, run away. This is not your battle to fight.

Our reading today picks up Jesus in mid-speech: "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened . . . . 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." And then turning again to the disciples, he leaves them with, "You all just stay on lookout duty. Like a fig tree putting forth new leaves for the summer, look for new blooms of my inbreaking kingdom. "Be alert. Stay awake."

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is nothing. But there are, at least according to Jesus, some benefits of doing nothing. Of simply staying awake. Of doing nothing more than paying attention. Or to put it in one word: Patience. Even in moments where it feels like the world might be ending. In our text, I see two things—one small thing and one big thing; benefits of being patient.

First, the small. One thing that tends to happen when it feels like the world is ending is that the world divides itself into two teams. Looking back through history, it seems obvious that people love thinking that they are living near the end of the world. So this happens a lot. Some might say it's happening right now.

This is exactly what is happening in the backdrop to the writing of Mark's Gospel. If you'll allow me to do a little bit of technical history, I'll explain. Most scholars agree that Mark's Gospel was written around the time of the four year Judean Revolt, which was a mini-war between Jews and Romans between the years 66 and 70 AD. Remember, in Jesus' time, Rome controlled Jerusalem. In the year 66, the Jews led a successful revolt and expelled the Romans from Jerusalem. This as you might guess made Rome very mad. And so Rome planned not only to recapture Jerusalem, but to flatten it completely as punishment. Mark's Gospel is right in the middle of this moment, after the Jews had retaken Jerusalem, before Rome took it back and destroyed the temple in 70 AD. The point of all this is that in this moment, the whole world was divided into two teams—Roman imperial loyalists drawing up battles plans and Jewish guerrilla nationalists committed to defending their city at all costs. And into this moment, Mark is holding up this speech of Jesus as a way of saying to followers of Jesus that they shouldn't choose either team. Defending the temple with violence is too great a cost to bear.

Sometimes, throwing in your allegiance wholeheartedly behind one team or another is too great a cost to bear for a Christian. One benefit of stepping aside from the fray, is that it at least can be a helpful reminder that as Christians we are not citizens of this world but of the world to come. Patience opens up a space where we can zoom out and see that actually everybody on both sides of every argument are beloved creatures of God. That we play for team Jesus. That God holds our primary and fundamental loyalty. And we ought always to hesitate before voicing our support for whatever temporary teams the world has divided itself into. That whatever support we do articulate, it is ever only temporary and practical; it is always partial, penultimate and not ultimate. That's the small point.

Which leads to the big point. If we take our focus away from our own action, away from thinking what *we* can or ought to do, that opens up space for us to look for something else, to something that we don't often think to pay attention to, to something that even now is very rarely paid attention to, and that is this: What God might be doing.

Let me slightly rephrase Jesus' sermon: He is saying, "You think this is the end of the world? Let me tell you what the end of the world will be like. 'In those days. . . the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. . . . Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and great 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.' The end of the world will not be brought about by you, by your predictable, political cycles of violence and rebellion. It will be brought about by God. You don't know when. No one knows the day or the hour. Whenever it happens, it will not be because of anything you do. It will be because God decides it is time."

The big point is this: Sometimes God is going to do what God is going to do whether you like it or not. Whether you participate or not. Whether you know it's coming or not. This is what Advent is all about. Advent is a time of waiting. Of patience. Advent is a time to recognize that there is something revolutionary about patience. There is something holy about patience. Patience invites us to turn aside from our everyday, predictable, political cycles of distraction and violence that we think everything depends on and ask ourselves a different question than one we typically think to ask: I wonder what God is doing here.

What was going to happen no matter what is that Jesus, the son of God, was going to be born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. But only a few shepherds and a few astrologers from the east were paying attention enough to recognize that this small event in a small village was something God was doing in their midst. What was going to happen no matter what is that Jesus was going to be crucified. But most of the people there weren't alert enough to recognize this death for what it was—the Romans assumed the empire was extinguishing yet another revolutionary movement; many Jewish religious leaders thought they were defending the purity of their faith. Only a small handful—one thief beside him, one Roman centurion among them—were aware that God might be involved here somehow. What's going to happen no matter what is that Christ is going to return to establish his kingdom comprehensively on this earth and gather his chosen from the four winds of the earth. The question is, are we paying attention enough to recognize the fruit of that kingdom already blossoming in our midst?

If you are feeling frustrated by our ongoing lockdown, or angry that others are choosing to ignore it; if you feel afraid looking ahead to another holiday alone, or hopeless not knowing how long it will continue to last after that, well, Advent is for you. Sometimes what happens next is not up to us. Sometimes it is just up to God. And so our question for this time is not “what do we do next?” Or even “what does God want us to do?” But instead “what is God already doing?” And then we're patient. We don't rush into action, but we pay attention. And in paying attention, our souls learn to breathe again. Less distracted by the lure of believing history is resting on our shoulders, we can be alert to what God is already doing right before our eyes. I wonder what God is already doing in your life.

Amen.