



**“What are you WAITING for?  
SCRIPTURE: MARK 13: 24-37  
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC  
November 29, 2020  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor**

Mark 13:24-37

13:24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 13:25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 13:26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 13:27 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. 13:28 "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. 13:29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 13:30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 13:31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 13:32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 13:33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 13:34 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. 13:35 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, 13:36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 13:37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

The Word of the LORD.  
Thanks be to God.

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2020 has been a year of waiting:

**(show pictures with split screen--pic and MMS)**

- Waiting for a vaccine **(picture #1)**
- Waiting to see people face to face again
- Waiting in line for a COVID test **(picture #2)**
- Waiting on hold with your insurance company to see if they'll pay for the COVID test **(picture #3)**
- Waiting on hold for just about anything (average American spends the equivalent of 43 days on hold in their lifetime)
- Waiting for the unemployment application process to go through.
- Waiting to hug a family member who lives in a nursing care facility **(picture #4)**
- Waiting for COVID results to come back
- Waiting to see if you have any symptoms

- Waiting for news about a loved one with COVID
- Waiting in line to vote **(picture #5)**
- Waiting for election results

At least there were some good memes that helped us wait for the election results--did you see this one about how long it was taking Nevada to wait? **(show drumming meme from twitter)**

Then there was this one, too. **(show baseball one from Facebook)**

Oh yeah, back to the waiting.

- Waiting for the current President to concede (we're still waiting)
- Waiting for your kids to go back to school (we're still waiting there, too) **(picture #6)**
- Waiting for our country to have a coordinated strategy to fight COVID (still waiting)
- Waiting for justice for Black lives (we're still waiting--after 100s of years of waiting...) **(picture #7)**

2020 has been a whole lot of waiting.

**(back to just MMS)**

And so much waiting has taken a toll. Because the order of magnitude of the waiting we have been doing day in and day out this year has been different than the run of the mill waiting that is a part of life. And the kind of waiting we have been doing in 2020 is a combination of the hardest kinds of waiting.

The psychology of waiting gives us a few clues about why the kind of waiting we have been doing in 2020 can harm our bodies, spirits, and communities.

Former Harvard Business School professor, David Maister, quantifies the way waiting impacts us by flagging three aspects of the human experience of waiting: Satisfaction, Perception, and Expectation

That means ten rules of thumb about waiting pretty much always hold true: **(list these one by one as I say them. Just list the blue part--like you did the Advent event list in announcements)**

- 1. Occupied time feels shorter than unoccupied time.**

2. **In process waits feel shorter than waits that seem to never get started** (in other words, moving you into the examining room for a while feels better than just sitting in the waiting room)
3. **Anxiety makes a wait seem longer**
4. **Uncertain/open ended waits feel longer than finite/known-quantity waits** (even if the uncertain wait ends up being shorter than the known quantity wait)
5. **Unexplained waits feel longer than explained waits**
6. **Unfair waits feel longer than equitable waits**
7. **People will accept a much longer wait for something they value more** (e.g. a higher priced meal or a prominent professor rather than a teaching assistant)
8. **Waiting alone feels longer than waiting in a group.**
9. **Waits that involve physical discomfort are harder than waits that involve a comfortable environment.**
10. **Waiting is longer when it is your first time to do this kind of waiting.**

Think about it--so many of the stress points that waiting can activate are tangled up in the kind of waiting we have been doing in 2020.

**(remove list)**

We haven't just been annoyed or frustrated by the waiting. The cumulative effect of all these kinds of waiting piled on top of each other is wearying, demoralizing, life-diminishing, even traumatizing.

Uncertainty, anxiety, inequity, isolation, physical discomfort, unknowns, unoccupied time, processes that are prolonged and seem to never begin. The kind of waiting we've been doing in 2020 brings with it little satisfaction... our perceptions of the waiting are generally stress inducing, and our expectations may be getting lower and lower as the year wears on our collective psyche.

So let's just acknowledge that no matter how you are weathering this year of waiting--the kind of waiting that has been imposed on the world, on the country, on community, on our households all piled on top of each other is HARD! And we feel it in our bodies, in our spirits, in our souls, in our relationships, and even in our imaginations, even in our dreams.

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**(picture #8)**

Our dreams are not isolated, random brain activity. They are deep collective hopes and fears. They are untapped possibilities and strange resolutions to intractable obstacles.

During this 2020 pandemic, especially during the wide-spread lock down in the Spring, there was a documented dream surge. In that surge anxiety dreams increased, as well as nightmares. Dreams collectively process trauma--and social conditions impact dreams across populations. Things like racism, abuse, natural disaster, authoritarian governments, genocide all impact dreams collectively.

[\(back to just MMS\)](#)

So while we have been waiting together in 2020, we have also been worrying together and dreaming together. All of this shared visceral data even though our bodies have been distanced, quarantined, and isolated.

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The passage we heard today is part of Mark's Gospel called "The Little Apocalypse." This mini apocalypse emerged in a traumatized community-- history hasn't given us a clear picture of the exact details of that trauma, but it seemed to have involved violent conflict, destruction of sacred space, imperial crack downs, cultural conflict, and massive societal shifts in relationships and alliances.

We are not sure if it was the state-sanctioned destruction of the Temple or a grassroots uprising against Rome or both, but there was profound insecurity, upheaval, and lack of safety for Jesus followers, and no doubt for others as well.

Mark's "Little Apocalypse" evokes images and tropes from apocalyptic literature of the Hebrew scripture--touchstones for those familiar with Jewish teaching and story-telling.

Remember apocalypse isn't about end times, it's about unveiling the truth in real time. It's about lifting the veil on human distortions to show the truth of Divine power at work in the world.

Illusions and delusions are shattered in apocalypse. But apocalypse does not unleash its disruption purely to unsettle or shake loose. Apocalypse is about redemption; apocalypse is about healing and about truth.

This “Little Apocalypse” in the middle of Mark’s gospel narrative is a lifeline for a traumatized people. And Mark was saying so much more than fasten your seatbelts, it’s about to get rough in here.

The Gospel writer is saying, don’t mistake the tumult of our time for reason to despair. This upheaval is the palate for God’s power to manifest--God’s capacity to birth a new world from the grip of great travail. God’s birthing power is not deterred by the destruction of the world as we know it. That destruction is the labor pangs in full force.

One of the things we often miss when we encounter apocalypse is the primal wisdom that faith imparts around both how we dream and how we manifest our dreams in the midst of turmoil.

Apocalypse is a powerful conflation of best and worst case scenarios. Apocalypse is the proving ground of faith because it packs a one two punch--**real time manifesting of a new way of being simultaneously deployed alongside radical collective imagination of a future still out of reach.**

In other words, faith is about embodying apocalypse in our current dispositions and in our dreams of a world we do not yet know.

**Think radical imagination meets radical transformation in real time.**

As people of faith we often fall prey to neglecting one or the other (imagination or transformation) because living in apocalypse is hard work--and we have to believe in ourselves and each other and God enough to will ourselves into postures of resilience, stamina, grief, hope, and creativity all at the same time.

But we can think being faithful just means being hopeful. And that’s just not true.

We can also think being faithful just means being present to the pain. And that’s just not true either.

Faithful waiting is both hopeful and sober, confident and wise.

Mark wanted the emerging Jesus following movement to be well versed in both best case scenarios and worst case scenarios. There is no short cut through either for faithful waiting.

Think of apocalypse as the faith olympics--all the training, all the preparation, all the visualizations, all the prayer, all the discipline, all the years of hopes and fears, all the blessed new days and all the dark nights of the soul--all of those things fold in to who we are and who we become in apocalypse.

Faithful waiting means these apocalypse muscles are called upon both to bear weight and to stretch all at once.

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Michael Phelps is the most medaled Olympic athlete of all time. He also holds the most world records of any athlete. 28 Olympic medals. 39 world records.

His coach, Bob Bowman, tells the story of how Michael's mental training is what took his physical training to the next level.

Michael both manifested and aspired. But he didn't do this by just thinking positive or by just working hard to reach his goal. Having a dream goal, a vision, having a way to envision/imagine what you want to see happen is important. Seeing one's dream vividly manifesting is called mental practice.

Brain science tells us that visualizing an experience uses the same brain circuits as experiencing the event in real life. That's important for us to note as we try to understand what faithful waiting asks of us.

Because the way our brain works is what makes just thinking positive all the time not the key to success. Instead, those who focus only on thinking positive actually tend to experience worse outcomes.

Idealizing things makes failure more likely.

If you focus too much on the positive, you can actually pacify your brain, your energy level. Visualizing best case scenarios has to be coupled with thinking through worst case scenarios. Otherwise purely positive thinking saps the body and psychic energy and stamina the human body needs to break through to a new level of accomplishment.

That's called "mental contrasting." Mental contrasting is when you have a positive ideal and then provide contrast by identifying the obstacles (inner and outer) that exist to achieving that ideal.

Hope alone is not enough. Radical honesty is also required!

That kind of honesty is required even when we are tempted to slip into the delusion that positive thinking is all we need. Worst case scenarios actually generate the energy we need to work for change, to work to realize our dreams.

Mental contrasting can get you through the most difficult physical and mental challenges you face. This kind of visualization makes realizing a dream much more likely.

### [\(picture #9\)](#)

Michael Phelps manifested this mental contrasting with vivid mental tapes of worse case scenarios playing out during races and how he would deal with it. And this practice paid off in a huge way in one of the biggest races of his amazing career.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics 200M butterfly final.

Phelps was working for a world record performance--1.50, a speed that would make it likely that his time could never be matched.

In that race, a worst case scenario came true.

After the dive Phelps' goggles filled up with water. He could not see anything. And if he took the goggles off, he would be disqualified.

It turns out Phelps had generated a mental tape visualizing this exact worst case scenario. He did this because he got bored with just thinking positive. Michael had done this without telling his coach he was doing it.

He had a mental tape of his goggles filling up with water, and he had played out what he needed to do--count his strokes. And so when disaster struck, he counted his strokes.

He wins the race and sets a world record at 1.52--not as fast as he had hoped, but a world record still and an Olympic Gold.

Because he had visualized this worst case scenario, he was able to do something that for most people would be unimaginable.

### [\(back to MMS\)](#)

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Remember Mark's Little Apocalypse--the darkened sun and moon, the stars falling from heaven, the cosmic powers shaken? Unprecedented challenge and change, loss and transformation. It was visualizing and mental contrasting for the early church under siege.

We are called to occupy the traumatic waiting of our time with the same radical imagination. As people of faith, we must have vivid dreams of God's creation healed--we must be able to imagine the smells, the tastes, the sensations, the songs, the freedom of the knitting together of heaven and earth. And we must have clear strategies for addressing the real obstacles that stand in our way.

That dreaming and that contrasting--that living faithfully in apocalypse--that's why we use so much energy to dismantle white supremacy, that's why we are learning together about new ways to tell the truth, that's why we embody uncharted territory in the ways we share resources, that's why we dedicate ourselves again and again to the already and not yet of beloved community.

God's kingdom isn't an impossible fantasy, but it is a beautiful dream we need to share vividly with each other. And without the worst case scenarios and the truth we tell each other about real obstacles, we will pacify ourselves into thinking a new world will emerge without us even lifting a finger.

So what are you WAITING for?

All this 2020 waiting has not been wasted time, it's been sacred time--a chance to dream and to manifest our dreams while we faithfully wait for a better world.

Thanks be to God.