

Sermon Text for December 2, 2018

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Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:32-37

“Keep awake” – First Sunday in Advent

We finished off stewardship season and we finished it off with a bang with Michael Wilson. What a great way to end that month. But we also set up a goal for January which was to put into action our words on Stewardship so that this year we will tithe in January if you are not already doing so, in order to experience the fullness of God’s blessings, especially in that area of our life, finances, where we tend to shut him out. I haven’t touched bases with you since Thanksgiving. I hope you all had a wonderful thanksgiving and that you ate too much, just because you can on Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a time when we do things we know we can’t or shouldn’t do and then pay for it during the weekend. I love Thanksgiving, because it also marks the beginning of Advent.

It also is a time that I look forward to because I get to sleep outside for hours at a time. Some people call it hunting, I call it catching up on my sleep. I saw a beautiful buck this year, but it had one horn less than it was supposed to, and I kept looking at it expecting, and waiting, and hoping, and knowing that if I looked hard enough at it that it would grow that extra horn. It never did. The excitement that I felt looking at that buck was almost overwhelming. My heart felt like it was going to explode just because of the possibility and the anticipation. Why don’t we feel that same sense of excitement for the coming of Jesus? That is what Advent is all about, remembering that Jesus is coming back and anticipating that return.

What a great season Advent is. How beautiful, cozy, spirit filled. This season reminds us of the sense of expectancy we need to have for the coming of Christ. It is hard for us adults to have that sense of expectancy for anything. The regularity of Christmas makes genuine expectancy difficult, at least for adults. We’ve lost it for Christmas because by the time we get the stockings up and the presents out Christmas Eve, we can’t wait to get to sleep. The kids on the other hand have an impossible time falling asleep. Advent requires of us a sense of expectancy, like children, we need to have a sense of excitement, not being able to fall asleep, the desire to stay awake for the coming of Christ. Imagine God made flesh, Immanuel, God with us, the Word dwelling

with us, Christ coming again, and that should elicit within us a sense of expectancy, and wakefulness that will kick our adrenalin in never allowing us to fall asleep.

The Scripture in Mark, a traditional Advent Scripture, speaks to us about this sense of expectancy for when Christ will come again. It doesn't just focus on that end time, as some people call it, but rather on the now time. This is an important Scripture for those who have forgotten what it is like to expect anything at all, especially the coming of Christ.

READ SCRIPTURE

In Colonial New England an eclipse of the sun took place that completely set the people in panic. They closed their stores, sent the kids home from school, the general population didn't know what was happening. By chance the state legislative session was underway and some legislators called for an adjournment. But one wise legislator stood and said: "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought."

What a great image of what we are called to do this Advent season. We are called not to panic and close shop, but to bring in the candles and continue in our vigilance and service to the Almighty God. But what is our duty, especially in light of this Advent season? Mark, in these verses 4 times tells us to keep awake. It is a Scripture about the end time, but Mark by reminding us to keep awake puts the stress on our present responsibilities. This parable serves to strengthen our discipleship in the present.

So what does Mark mean when he tells us that our duty is to stay awake. Isn't this a little too passive for those of us who like to actually do something? Mark gives us a parable that is prefaced by the statement that nobody, absolutely nobody, knows when this end time is going to be. The angels don't know, not even the Son himself knows, only the Father does. We do not know and if anyone tells you that they know they are seriously misguided.

We do know that Christ is coming back, but we just don't know when. Let me give you some Scriptures that talk about these first two verses in our reading this morning that tells us that Christ will come, but we just don't know when. Look at Matthew 24:42, 44. Again almost identical to Mark where we are told to stay awake, because we don't know when Christ is coming except that it will be a surprise and totally unexpected when he does come. In Luke 21:34-36 we are told to be on guard. I Thessalonians 5:2 gives us

the well known image of the Christ coming back like a thief in the night. I Peter 5:8 tells us to be disciplined and alert because the enemy is on the prowl like a lion looking to pounce.

Scripture tells us this Advent message, this message of the coming of Christ, that he is coming, there is no doubt. But we need to keep awake because nobody, except God the Father knows when. In our first Scripture in Isaiah, again another traditional Advent Scripture, we read that God's people are beseeching him to come quickly, they repent of their sins and recognize that they are the clay, they have no control over the happenings in this world, and God is the potter. That is a good place to start when we speak about Advent and being prepared. Let's start by recognizing again that we are the clay and Jesus is the potter in all that we do.

Jesus then tells us a parable in Mark about a master who leaves and lets his servant be in charge of what is left behind. This should sound vaguely familiar as Jesus all throughout his life is called teacher, Lord, Rabbi, Master and Jesus encourages his disciples to be slaves. Remember in Matthew 20:20-28 when the mother of the sons of Zebedee wants her sons to be the first and Jesus says to her: Whoever wishes to be great must be a servant and whoever wishes to be first must be a slave, just as Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. We find the same lesson in the washing of the feet, and so this parable obviously deals with Christ leaving and leaving the responsibility of the church, of his work, of his kingdom of God to his disciples.

He tells them, your responsibility in running my kingdom is really quite simple, stay awake. But even with this warning what happens just one chapter later in Mark when Jesus goes to the Garden and again, this time without the veil of a parable, tells his disciples directly in verse 34: "I am deeply grieved, even to death, remain here and keep awake." Three times he wakes them and three times they fall asleep in Mark. You see why this parable was geared to provide the disciples with a sense of urgency and expectancy that Jesus knew they would not be able to maintain.

Keep awake is a call by Mark for each of us as well. We are called not just to sit back and do nothing, because then sleep can come upon us easily. Especially when you are outside, in the cold, in a lawn chair, wrapped up in warm winter clothes, it is easy to fall asleep then. We are called to beware, be vigilant, keep your eyes open, pay attention. We are called to bring in the candles and to carry on with our duties as disciples and slaves of the Christ.

But today in Mark we have been warned. And the entire season of Advent serves as a warning for us about the coming of Christ. But keeping awake, actively awake is not something that comes naturally, it is something that we need to work on. We cannot count on those around us to wake us and remind us of our responsibilities. This message of Mark is perfectly suited for the church in Advent. Mark is telling us not to fall asleep. Do not rely on others to do that which you know ought to be done in the church. For the early church there was a stronger sense of the immanent return of Christ, but Mark still felt the need to remind them.

In Revelation 3:2 we hear another call to wakefulness. John tells the church in Sardis: Wake up and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death. God calls us today to a wakefulness that is active and takes initiative and bears upon our shoulders the responsibilities. The greatest danger the 21st century church faces is that it finds itself sleepwalking.

I used to talk and walk in my sleep all the time. My roommate in college would keep a tape recorder next to his bed because I never believed him when he told me what I would do. I've set a chair on my bed and sat there, I've fallen down flights of stairs, maybe that explains a lot. But it is so easy to go through what you are used to do doing while you are sleeping and not even know what you are doing or that you are even going through the motions.

God calls us to break out the candles, to shed new light on old practices. To understand what it means to expect Christ. To finally live a life of discipleship and servanthood to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Jesus calls us this first Sunday in Advent to wake up, become servants, get to work. Because Jesus is coming, and we shouldn't be able to wait. We should all be in the church with the engine running, with the programs hopping because we would be found in our duty.

May God bless us to stay awake this Advent season, so that we may be found worthy of the Christ. Amen.