

Pastor Joe Polzin
 Mark 13:24-37
 “Stay Awake!”
 Year B – First Sunday in Advent
 December 3, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our text for this morning comes from the Gospel reading, especially the last section, beginning at verse 32, as Jesus tells a parable of a man going on a journey. Hear these few verses one more time:

Jesus says: “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. 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 servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake” (Mark 13:32-37).

I need a little congregational participation this morning. There’s this strange type of person, and I’d like to know if you’re one of them. They’re called “morning people.” You know, you’re the type of person who hardly ever sleeps in. You like to get up early, even if it’s before an alarm, because you’re just excited to start your day. Raise your hand if this describes you. Yes, my wife is a morning person too, and I just don’t understand it.

You see, I like my sleep too much. And every morning, as I get out of bed, it’s *always* in protest. Even though I’m typically the first one up in my house, I never actually want my sleep to end. Raise your hand if this describes you, if you’re not a morning person.

In Jesus’ parable, he talks about not sleeping, but rather, staying awake. Thankfully, and I take some solace in this, he’s not saying we’re not allowed to sleep as Christians, he’s talking about a *lifestyle* of wakefulness. So, us non-morning people can rest easy.

But how did this come up for Jesus? Well, let’s back up for just a moment. At the beginning of chapter 13, Jesus is walking out of the temple in Jerusalem with his disciples, when one of them says, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (13:1) And Jesus took the opportunity to teach them, and warn them that these stones, and the temple, and even the city of Jerusalem, all represented the old order of things. And what’s more, they wouldn’t last. Something brand new was about to take place in Jesus, with his death, resurrection, and ascension, and his commissioning his disciples into the whole world to preach his Gospel.

And Jesus’ words would come to pass about 40 years later, in 70 AD, when the Romans did destroy Jerusalem. That’s why he said “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (13:30).

But woven into this warning about the “abomination of desolation” (13:14), the impending destruction of Jerusalem, he begins to then talk about the Last Day. In verse 32, he says, “But concerning that day or that hour...” Jesus is speaking about the day and hour he returns. If you remember last week, we heard about Judgment Day, the day that Christ comes back to this world. And how our place at Jesus’ side will be as his sheep, his righteous ones. Now, Jesus has some words regarding how we are to wait for that day in the meantime.

Since we do not know when he is returning, he says, “Be on guard, keep awake” (13:33). And then he tells a simple parable about a man, who is the master of a household, leaving for a journey. The master places his servants in charge of various things, so that operations will continue to run smoothly while he’s away. And as he’s walking out, he has one last important task to give. Though there are many other servants, it’s interesting, we don’t hear about them. The *doorkeeper* is singled out, as the master commands the doorkeeper to “stay awake” (13:34). It will be the doorkeeper who will see the master returning, no matter the hour of night or day, and he alone will be able to alert the others of the master’s imminent return.

Jesus is focusing us in on this doorkeeper. It’s the main point of his parable. He concludes his whole discussion with one simple command in verse 37: “And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.” Jesus wants us to relate to this doorkeeper, because he gives us the same charge. To stay awake.

On this first Sunday in Advent, the message is clear: our master is returning, and as God’s Advent people, we must be alert and awake, because His return is any day now. And a doorkeeper not only watches at the door for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the whole household. Which for us, is the whole church, and even the whole world. We alone uniquely know that we are in fact waiting, waiting for something important, the return of Christ, which is coming soon. And it’s our responsibility to tell others about it, prepare our family and friends, our neighbors and those who don’t know.

And yet... how many of us, instead of being awake, are found sleep-walking through life? Falling asleep in church, literally or metaphorically, is one thing. We all have those moments where we might not be consciously aware of what it is we’re saying, hearing, or doing. But in sin, we may be tempted to live spiritually asleep day in and day out. We can be fully unaware that the day is fast-approaching, and all the while living as if it’s not.

We’re like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, who only one chapter later in Mark’s Gospel, were asked by their Lord to “remain here and watch” (Mark 14:34) while he prayed. And while their spirit may have been willing, their flesh was weak. And the disciples failed their Lord, as they were found asleep, physically and spiritually, at the most critical moment, right before his arrest and betrayal and crucifixion.

The call to remain awake is the call of Advent. It’s why this reading falls on the first of Advent. We are called to repent for our sleepiness... and are renewed to stay awake. You know, there are many thoughts about the season of Advent, and what it actually is. For some, it may just be synonymous with the Christmas season. It’s simply the time between Thanksgiving and December 25th. Others may see it as the Christian alternative to a December of malls, mayhem, and maxed-out credits cards. It can be presented as the “better way to prepare for Christmas.” Still others use Advent to focus on family traditions or celebrations, preparing them for Jesus’ birth, so that this year can be the most meaningful and sentimental Christmas ever.

Now, I have nothing against all these things. In fact, if you drive by my house, you’ll see that our Christmas lights are up, the tree’s in the window, and we are preparing for the celebration of Christ’s birth. But that’s not what Advent is first and foremost. The historical observance of Advent is primarily a renewal of our charge as Christians to be doorkeepers. To stay awake, as Jesus says. To watch and pray. We are to use this time to refocus our lives as God’s Advent people, as doorkeepers watching and waiting, alert and awake, night and day, for the return of our master.

And it reminds us, that though we may have gotten drowsy and forgotten, and that in our sin, our spirit is willing but our flesh is weak, we have a God who still faithfully comes to us.

You see, that's the recurring narrative we find in the Bible. That God comes to His people, even when His people have failed to faithfully keep watch for Him.

From the time Adam and Eve failed in their faithfulness in the Garden, they were told, right there in Genesis 3, that the Offspring of the woman would come, who would crush the head of the serpent. A Savior was promised to them. And this promise was the defining characteristic of the Israelites all the way through the pages of Scripture. The promise given to Abraham and his descendants, the promise given to the Hebrew people, as God led them out of slavery in Egypt, into the Promised Land, and into battle against their enemies. The promise given to King David, and his line. The promise given to the exiles living in a foreign land. Throughout all of it, the promise from God is the same: that His people, who wait on the Lord, who wait for His salvation, do not wait in vain. He is coming.

Our Old Testament reading says, "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him" (Isaiah 64:4). The people of Israel were waiting on the promised Savior, the one who would come, who would finally deliver them from their ultimate enemies of sin and death. The Israelites were doorkeepers, awaiting the Messiah, just as we are today.

You see, that's why Advent precedes Christmas. Not to get us ready to have the best Christmas ever. It's to remind us that just as God was faithful to His promise that a Savior would come to Israel, God will be faithful to His promise that our Savior will come again.

But waiting can be hard. We may see all the sin and pain and despair in the world, and so we pray, "Come, quickly, Lord." That's been the prayer of the Church for 2,000 years. Others, though, may grow impatient, and want Him to come according to our time, rather than His. It can be frustrating not to know, and so we, like the saints in Revelation 6 cry out, "How long, O Sovereign Lord?" (6:10) Or there are some, who not seeing His return in their lifetimes, slip into the exact opposite of being a watchful and alert disciple, and become drowsy and lackadaisical in their faith.

All these are temptations, and if it were up to us, temptations we'd give in to. But God's Word comforts us, and Christ tells us He is with us always (Matt. 28:20). And until the day he returns, he gives us a wonderful promise, which we heard in our Epistle Reading, from 1 Corinthians, "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1:7-8).

God has given us gifts to strengthen as we wait. The gift of His Word, and of prayer. Conduits that we can use to constantly hear what He has to say directly to us in His Word, and by which are able to speak to Him in return in prayer. He's given us the gift of Baptism, which has brought us into the fellowship of His Son. He's given us the gift of the Lord's Supper, to sustain our faith, as we are given the forgiveness of our sins. We would be foolish to despise any of these gifts, and not make use of them frequently as we keep watch.

God gives us an important task to be doorkeepers in this world. That's hard to do! To stay awake! But He's also given us everything we need in order to accomplish this task. And because of *His* faithfulness, we will be sustained to the end, guiltless, forgiven, and free in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.