

Sermon for December 1, 2019 – “Keep Awake!”

First Sunday of Advent, Year A – Texts: Matthew 24:36-44

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It is time to begin again. Advent is here. The wreath is set out. The color purple adorns the sanctuary. We're dusting off the advent portion of the hymnbook and we're settling in for four weeks of waiting and watching, of “keeping awake” as Jesus puts it for the coming of the Messiah. But as hard as it might be to believe Advent's not an annoying countdown for Christmas invented by pastors to keep people from singing Christmas carols in December, nor is it despite evidence to the contrary something dreamed up Amazon or by some of the bigger retailers to sell more merchandise. Nope, it ain't that. Advent is something else. It's a complete idea, better described as a season unto itself.

Advent reminds us of where we began as Christians as God's people waiting for salvation in a dark world. It's not about, and this is important, what comes at the **end** of the waiting but about what the waiting really **means** for us, about how waiting for that which is **not** here. Things like justice and peace in the world compels us to not just **want** those things but to **strive** for those things. Advent is about seeing the world as it can be, about how God intends it to be, and about what it will be like when the Messiah finally comes. Advent is about waiting for God to come to rescue us and it's about how God is waiting for our eyes adjust to the darkness so that we can see that God is, in fact, already bringing light and hope into our world.

Today, we are resetting the church's cycle of telling the story of Jesus. A cycle that's been on-going in some form or another for nearly 2,000 years. And in the three-year cycle of readings that we follow Sunday after Sunday, the lectionary, today is beginning of Year A, the first year of the cycle. Which means that today we've heard the first gospel reading on the first Sunday of the first year of the cycle. And isn't it strange that the first words chosen for us to hear from scripture are passages about the end of time? Coincidence? I think not. Last week on Christ the King Sunday we ended the church year by going to the **middle** of the story, the crucifixion. And today, on the first Sunday of the new church year we start by going to **end**. Sometimes the church can do things a little backwards. But I digress.

There's a reason to start at the end or at least, as Jesus tells His disciples, that no one but the Father knows the day or hour He'll return. Jesus is trying to get us to see something important, which is usually the case. So we might want to pay attention which is actually the point. Well, at least one of them. In any case, I'm not talking about simply paying attention to me though I'd really appreciate it if you did. No, I'm talking about paying attention to what Jesus is saying in Matthew's Gospel reading this morning. Jesus is trying to tell us something about what it means to be ready for the end of all things. Now, given that we're kicking off the season of Advent, the season of preparation, the notion that no one knows the day or hour of coming of the Son of Man has always seemed more of technicality to me. I mean, it's not like we have the date/time marked on our calendars, but we're to be ready just the same. Sure, we have Christmas down as December 25, a little over three weeks from now, but it isn't like we actually believe that He's coming back that day – do we? He might, but then He could come on December 24, couldn't He? Or December 26?

Then again, He could come on January 4 – or even June 18. Quite frankly, He can come whenever He darn well pleases. Of course, there've been people who've made a career out of letting people know when they believed Christ would return. It turns out that they were wrong but again, I digress. It seems fair at this point to ask, exactly what **are** we talking about here? I mean, Advent – it's all about preparation, isn't it? Jesus wants us to be prepared, right? Look busy, Jesus is coming and all that. And the issue here seems to be about knowing and not knowing the time. Well, not so fast. The examples that Jesus gives of unreadiness are about more than failing to live up to the Boy Scout motto.

Let's take a look. The people of Noah's day had no idea what was coming. The two working in the field were oblivious otherwise they wouldn't have been in the fields. The same for the women grinding meal. The owner of the house is robbed because he wasn't awake. Jesus doesn't say be ready because you don't know the day or hour. Jesus says **keep awake**. In other words, maybe all our Advent preparations **aren't** what Jesus is talking about. Maybe as we're about to put a lot of our attention and focus into trips to the mall or on-line for gift buying, putting up lights and baking Christmas cookies, filling our calendars with Christmas parties and concerts getting ready for the Messiah by getting ready for the holidays, maybe Jesus is talking about something **different**. Jesus is talking about **keeping awake**.

Keeping awake to the world around us is more than a matter of not knowing the exact moment. It's about **awareness**. It's about being attentive in particular, paying close attention to the world around us. Letting our eyes adjust to dark places which always takes a bit of time to the people and circumstances around us who really need light and hope and salvation. Because **keeping awake** means paying attention to the hard stuff, being aware of the suffering of our neighbors, being willing to bear one another's burdens be it here at Westwood First, out in Westwood itself, or in places like the Spirit Lake reservation. **Keeping awake** might be finally opening our eyes to the crises of domestic abuse, addiction and homelessness. **Keeping awake** might be at last involving ourselves in the plight of refugees and those fleeing war torn areas all over the world. **Keeping awake** might mean looking for ways to end the violence here in Westwood and throughout Cincinnati, violence that seems to surround us right now and threatens to engulf us. **Keeping awake** might mean taking our new status as a Matthew 25 church seriously and working to combat systemic poverty and structural racism while working to revitalize our own mission/ministry. **Keeping awake** might mean spending some time discerning what God's will for Westwood First might be and finally taking seriously, no longer dismissing the notion, that God is calling each and every one of us to be a part of what He is already at work doing **among** us, **in** us, and **through** us.

The more we open our eyes – the farther we see. The more **aware** we are the more we'll be **able** to do. **Keeping awake** is hard. **Keeping awake** is often painful. We'd much rather watch Christmas movies on the Hallmark Channel and drink egg nog. It's much easier to be distracted and on autopilot with Christmas preparations than it is to sit, rest and be kept awake in Advent. Still as Jesus implores us to be awake the examples He uses are ones where people are still sleeping. The people around Noah did not see the flood coming. The ones working in the field, the ones grinding meal didn't know the time was coming. The owner of the house wasn't expecting to be robbed. They weren't awake – they were sound asleep. And each time, the Son of Man came anyway.

You see, Jesus might tell us to **keep awake** with the disciples and to watch for the coming of the Messiah into our world, but the Messiah's coming doesn't depend on our wakefulness. (Thank goodness!) In fact, He knows that we'll probably be asleep too. Yet, the Messiah comes because the world needs a Messiah. The Messiah comes because we're waiting for salvation. The Messiah comes because we need hope. As Charles Sell so wonderfully put it, If our greatest need had been information God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was salvation – so God sent us a **Savior**.

Still, **keeping awake** isn't about simply waiting for the Messiah to come but about seeing where the Messiah **already is!** **Keeping awake** isn't just about seeing the bad stuff but letting us see the light. **Keeping awake** is letting our eyes adjust to the dark so that we begin to see that there **IS** light. The Messiah's light is appearing anywhere and anytime two or three gather in His name to bear one another's burdens. The Messiah's light grows as people all over the world begin to take a stand against the crises that threaten them. The Messiah's light multiplies as friends and neighbors stand up and speak out against discrimination, violence and hate. The Messiah's light shows up wherever there are people willing to help, where people are willing to listen for God's still, small voice and follow where He might be leading them. And the Messiah's light is born here among us as we gather to tell God's story of salvation, as we gather to worship, as we gather to meet and be about our Father's business, as we gather to share fellowship, to tell our stories, to be present to/for one another. The Messiah's light shines when we live and grow in understanding and love and faithfulness as a community of disciples; no longer simply surviving – but thriving as we move together toward God's planned future.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, the end **is** coming. The Son of Man arrives at an unexpected day and hour. So, **keep awake**. **Keep awake** for Advent. **Keep awake** in a dark world. **Keep awake** even though it's hard. And even though we're sleeping the Messiah comes. And here in our dark world, in our city, in our neighborhood, in our church the Messiah's light is born...again. The Messiah's light grows. The Messiah's light is here. The Messiah is the story of Advent, the story that we're beginning over again today. The Messiah is that small light in a dark world, the light that's hard to see until our eyes adjust but is there, nevertheless. The Messiah is that small light pushing back the darkness allowing us to see a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. So, **keep awake** because you do not know on what day our Lord is coming, but you do know that He is on His way!

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.