

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
December 3, 2017

First Sunday in Advent
Theme: KEEP AWAKE! BE READY!
Text: St. Mark 13:24-37

[Jesus said:] ²⁴“In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then 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.

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. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It 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.

³⁵Therefore, 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, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

In Nomine Jesu

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It’s tempting to start with a rousing “Happy New Year!” on this first sermon of the church’s new year. But I’m going to resist that temptation. Not because I’m afraid of what that greeting might do to you. I know you’ve already gotten relief from Thanksgiving’s abundance, you’ve survived whatever Black Friday meant for you, cyber Monday is even history, but you’ve undoubtedly realized that the holiday planning and shopping and preparations are still pretty huge challenges. So no rousing “Happy New Year!” from me. Just a modest reminder ... the annual one ... that this Sunday, is New Years Day for our worship cycle together each year.

That’s the case because the church’s year begins with what’s called the Christmas Cycle, and that Christmas Cycle starts with four Sundays of getting ready to celebrate Christmas – they’re called Sundays in Advent. Today’s the first. Then the Cycle has us spending twelve whole days celebrating Christmas ... (I bet you know folk who think it’s all over in one or two, right?). And finally the Christmas Cycle concludes with a number of Sundays devoted to pondering what the Christmas message means for the whole world – they’re called Sundays

after Epiphany – January 6 – the day the church celebrates the visit by the Wise Men who came from far away in a foreign land to honor the baby Jesus.

Add to that – and you might not have noticed this one – the fact that our Holy Gospel readings ... the reading we hear each Sunday that we usually use as the text for our sermons ... are coming from the Gospel of Mark most of this new year (last year they were from Matthew, remember?). There's lots of new stuff going on. And to top it off we're using a new setting for our communion liturgy this season. That's lots of new stuff.

But our text from this new book of the Bible, Mark's Gospel, didn't sound all that new, right? That's because it's a text about being ready ... just like the texts for the last several weeks have been ... for the coming of Jesus at the end of time. That's when he'll bring us all to heaven and we'll be with him and the Father and the Holy Spirit and all the saints we're looking forward to spending eternity with for ever. Can't miss the point, can we? We heard important teachings in our text from Jesus about what he expects us to do while we're waiting for that fantastic event. He uses words like "beware," "keep alert," "you don't know when the time will come," and "keep awake"! He must really have liked that last one, since he uses it twice in our text.

I think it's interesting that he doesn't call us to "wake up," right? He calls us to "KEEP AWAKE!" Like we can do that, right? Anybody and everybody knows that we can't do that ... even people who have sleep disorders and think they can't sleep at all find out that they sleep some times. It's part of living to spend a good bit of time sleeping. So why does Jesus call us to do the seemingly impossible? "KEEP AWAKE!" Well, I think that it's because what we're waiting for is so important and that it's so critical for us to live "on the ready" ... maybe that's a better way of understanding what Jesus is asking of us. To "be ready" to welcome him.

And just so we don't get lulled into thinking that we can let our minds wander off right about now, this text hits us with several strong ... maybe a bit unsettling ... points.

- It's really gonna happen, and it's just around the corner. You'll know it's almost here when the solar system goes crazy ... the sun gets dark, you can't see the moon, and stars will fall from the heaven. You might be kind of smiling thinking that those are just ways of talking about solar eclipses, lunar eclipses, and shooting stars or comets. Guess what, you're probably exactly correct. Jesus wants us to know that those are reminders that things aren't always going to go on just the way they've gone on before. So when that expected ... but "time uncertain" ... day of Jesus' return does come, don't let it surprise you. KEEP AWAKE! BE READY!

- Next, when it happens, hold on to your hats! It's going to be absolutely spectacular! No real details ... just a general preview. Jesus will come in clouds with power and glory. And the angels will be busy getting everybody from all over the world plus everybody who has already experienced death cued up for what's happening. And don't make any mistake! As sure as green leaves sprouting on dormant branches tell you that seasons are changing, so sure can you be that it's just around the corner. KEEP AWAKE! BE READY! Count on it ... the earth we're living on and the universe as we know it is gonna pass away, but this word of Jesus is absolutely for sure. KEEP AWAKE! BE READY!
- And, last but not least, don't waste time trying to figure out or find out when it's gonna happen, Jesus reminds us. Why? Well, because nobody ... not even he ... knows what day or what time it's gonna happen. Just listen up, though! For sure it's gonna happen! Jesus keeps his word, so count on it. KEEP AWAKE! BE READY!

All right, already, we say. Got the message. But ready for what? This text doesn't help us all that much. We'd really be more than willing ... fact is we're more highly motivated today than usual ... to get ready for what's gonna happen. But if we don't know what's gonna happen or when, how are we supposed to get ready?

You know what I mean. If it's gonna be like a big potluck, I could get the cooking done. If it's gonna be like an "extreme makeover" of this world since we've messed it up so bad, I could get my tools and rakes and shovels and paint and stuff like that ready to go. But we don't know, so how can we get ready? Why even stay awake?

Simply because Jesus asks us to live that way. So that we're not caught off guard. So that we're not "asleep on the job" – folks lose their jobs for that kind of stuff, right? So that whatever he wants us to be ready for is what he calls us to be ready to do.

And the only hint we get is that it's going to be about something like when a man goes on his journey and leaves his home and puts his slaves – that's us, by the way – in charge "each of us with our own work" and commands the doorkeeper – that's not us – to be on the watch.

It's not our job to watch and wait and wonder whether or when the man is returning from his journey. That's the doorkeeper's job. It's our job to get at the work that each of us has – our very own, special vocation – so that when the Master returns we'll be ready.

That's right, we're "in charge" of whatever it is that we're supposed to be doing. And we all know what happens when we get put in charge of anything. Oh, we think we'll do it just great, but – guess what – we never do. We cut a little here, trim a little there, try the shortcut we see, think it's gonna be a breeze. And then we find out ... every time ... that whatever we're in charge of ... even just being a loving and caring person reflecting Jesus' love and care for all ... never is done. Never really right. Never hardly right at all. The best we try falls short.

So thank God for the watchman! And one of the things that watchman reminds us of is why Jesus left in the first place. He left because he'd accomplished "his own work." He'd come and lived among us; he'd joined himself to human frailty and failure; he'd suffered the consequence of each and every such fault and failure in his death on Calvary's cross. Then – trusting God's word that never fails – Jesus was raised again so that we could know that we'll be raised to life forever with him and the Father and the Holy Spirit. He's accomplished "his own work" of making us right with God. He's called us brothers and sisters. And he's left us with "our own work" ... simply to live the love and life of Jesus in this world all the days of our lives.

That's why it all fits together so well today. The new colors and beautiful decorations remind us that something's coming ... really soon, really big. Jesus' call from this new book of Gospel readings from Mark asks us to do the obvious – KEEP AWAKE. BE READY.

What a joy that again today we remember that since we're free from having to worry about showing God how good we are ... Jesus has already done that perfectly for us ... we can spend our whole lives living for, loving, and serving others ... especially those who haven't heard the word about what's just about to happen. To live lives and make choices in everything we do that show anybody who's watching that we're awake ... that we're ready. It's like we're living our lives by the game clock that Jesus has given us. We're late in the last period, and the time is almost running out. So let's KEEP AWAKE. Let's BE READY.

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN

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Soli Deo Gloria