

ADVENT 1 SERMON
NOVEMBER 30, 2008
“KEEP AWAKE!”

Let us pray: Gracious God, keep us awake and attentive to the signs of your coming and fill us with hope and anticipation. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Let's be honest. There's something about church-going that promotes drowsiness. I always thought as a kid that it must've been the long, boring sermons, but since I've now long been responsible for preaching sermons myself I know that can't be it—or at least it isn't the only reason for the drowsiness I often look out upon. Nor do I think it's these far-from-comfortable wooden pews you find yourselves sitting in on a Sunday morning, the slightly too-warm temperature and stuffy atmosphere, or the cozy feeling that a small and intimate sanctuary like ours provides.

Narcolepsy, as I mentioned a few weeks ago in connection with Jesus’ parable of the ten bridesmaids, all of whom, wise and foolish alike, fell asleep, **narcolepsy** seems to have been a problem for the church even before there was a church—if we take Jesus’ own disciples for our example. For remember how on that last night of his life, after sharing that last Passover meal together in a Jerusalem upper room, Jesus had led his disciples out on a post-prandial stroll—like we always do after a big Thanksgiving dinner-- to the Garden of Gethsemane where he told his disciples, “*Sit here while I pray.*” (Oh, oh, we think; didn’t he know better?) And taking with him Peter, James and John—his inner circle, a kind of executive committee among the disciples, I suppose-- he told them to follow him, to a quiet corner of the Garden where, St. Mark bothers to tell us, “*he began to be distressed and agitated.*” (It’s the one part of his overwrought “Passion of the Christ” film that Mel Gibson

got close to right.) Apparently something very serious is troubling Jesus on this momentous night and he goes so far as to admit to his inner circle of disciples who were also his closest friends, “*I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake,*” the very same Greek verb in the imperative mood we heard at the end of today’s Gospel reading.

You know the story, how, as St. Mark tells it, “*going a little farther he (Jesus) threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him, saying “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.”*” Perhaps, next to the moment of his death on the cross and his weeping at his friend Lazarus’ tomb, the most revelatory moment of Jesus’ utter humanity in all of the Gospels.

Immediately after this heart-rending prayer, St. Mark continues, “*Jesus came and*

*found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon are you asleep? Could you not **keep awake** one hour? **Keep awake** and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* We’re not told why Jesus interrupted his prayer to go seek and find his sleeping disciples, but I can’t help but think that he may have needed their human companionship, maybe even a bit of their counsel, in the midst of the distress he was evidently suffering. But they were sleeping. And so again, the same Greek imperative, **“Keep awake.”**

“And so again he went away and prayed,” Mark says, *“saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him.”* And finally, *“he came a third time and said to them “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the*

hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

You see what I mean? Narcolepsy — heaviness of the eyes, especially in time of crisis — seems to be the characteristic affliction of Jesus’ followers, perhaps a kind of spiritual, almost genetic, predisposition handed down through **apostolic succession** to the church of our day.

That’s why, on this first Sunday in Advent, the New Year’s Day of the church year, we’ll be joining our voices in our rousing oldie but goodie Lutheran chorale “**Wake, Awake, For Night Is Falling**” known simply in German as “Wachet Auf” which means simply “Wake Up” or “Stay Awake” but also can carry the warning tone of “Watch Out!” which pretty much comes to the same thing. As our hymn of the day we’ll be singing the sprightly Marty Haugen Advent hymn, “**Awake, Awake, and Greet the New Morn**” — notice the repetition of the

word “awake” in the title. One apparently isn’t enough for the church.

And, of course, today’s Gospel reading from St. Mark—just the chapter preceding the story of Jesus in Gethsemane—Jesus concludes his extended discourse on the signs of the times that would precede the end and his coming again—his second advent—with an uncommon, almost underlined, emphasis: “**And what I say to you I say to all:** (ta da!--flourish of trumpets) **Keep awake**” —the very same Greek imperative we heard at the end of Jesus’ parable the ten bridesmaids.

Advent, sisters and brothers in Christ, is the annual “**wake-up call**” of the church. It’s that early warning time of the church year that rings the **tocsin**, the alarm bell, the ancient counterpart to our fire or police siren, rousing us from our comfortable slumber with the way things are in our world, reminding us that there’s a crisis brewing in our world (as if just now

anybody needed to be reminded!). As we heard last week in Jesus' parable of the last judgment, this is the “**kairos**” in Greek, the critical time when there's lots for us to do in this peace-making, justice-serving, mercy-practicing calling to love our neighbor as ourselves in the kind of world we inhabit. Jesus is out there to be met in all kinds of desperate situations and needy folks, as he himself promised us.

Advent is the time when we're called to wake up and see what's happening around us, to read the signs of the times and see that this world simply can't go on the way it's going, there's too much violence, too much hatred, too much hunger, too much poverty, too much disease, too much environmental degradation, all of which boils down to too much bad **faith and mis-directed religion**, for our world to be able to endure much longer. We need God's intervention, Jesus' promised return, and we need it soon—and the sooner the better!

As Don Juel, a Princeton Seminary NT professor who happened to be Lutheran who died several years ago of cancer, has written, the Gospel of Mark, which we begin hearing read today and throughout this coming year in our three-year lectionary cycle, seems to be a Gospel written to address a church that had tasted success and found it satisfying—an overly comfortable church composed of believers who had begun to take the Gospel for granted, who no longer saw the world painted in dramatic colors. And so St. Mark set out to re-tell the story of Jesus in a way designed to shock the sleepy church of his day into a fresh awareness of the urgency of the Gospel. **“Stay awake,”** Jesus warns them and speaking over their heads warns us, the church our day. The world is and will continue to be a dangerous place for the church, Jesus is saying. The future holds trials, worse than anything since the foundation of creation. There is hope in the

end—certain hope. But the faithful must be prepared for what is to come. Naiveté or indifference is the prelude to disaster. So “keep awake.”

Not, mind you, as though our calling is to “scare the hell” out of people—although that’s not a bad image, is it, to literally scare the hell out of people. But to announce that ours is a world—as it was in Mark’s day, as much as nineteen and a half centuries ago—that’s in for a big surprise, a surprise as inevitable and foreseeable, Jesus says, as the way in which the little buds on an otherwise seemingly dead and lifeless tree portend that summer is already on its way. Or it’s like a pregnant woman who knows and sensibly fears the excruciating birth pangs that she will soon have to endure, but nonetheless knows that patience and endurance will surely lead to the promised birth of that new life even now kicking within her womb.

Or, Jesus says, it's like a man going on a journey who leaves his slaves in charge, each with his own work, much like the parable of the talents we heard a couple of weeks ago. But he commands his doorkeeper to be on watch, knowing the Master may return at any time, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn—at any moment—and the Master mustn't find us asleep when he suddenly appears.

God wants us ready and alert, sisters and brothers, busy with the work of the kingdom, sensible to the signs of the times and lovingly responsive to the least of those in our midst.

As Paul wrote the Corinthian church in today's second reading: know that God *“will strengthen you **to the end**, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **God is faithful**; by him you were called into the communion of the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

So wake up, keep awake and watch out not because Santa Claus is coming to town and demands to know whether you've been naughty or nice--but because Jesus is—and that's worth waiting for, to welcome him into our world with eyes wide open and hearts yearning for his return.

Happy Advent!