



## Keep Awake (Advent 1)

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*Let us pray: Lord God, we thank you for your love, your grace in our lives. We thank you for the calling that you have given us as we are sent to do your work in this world. May we be your faithful disciples. Amen.*

Well, it doesn't take a New Testament scholar or a brilliant theologian to understand that today's gospel lesson is that we are to "keep awake". If I titled today's sermon, that would be the title of today's particular sermon. We're to keep awake during this time.

For no one knows when the second coming of our Lord may occur. In this period of time, we're called to be ready, to be on the alert. That's the point of these parables that we'll be reading during this season of Advent. It kind of makes us think of the Boy Scout motto, right? Be prepared. Get ready. Live ready. Keep awake.

Would you agree with me, though, that keeping awake can be easier said than done at times? Definitely. I'll use a personal illustration from my archives.

I grew up hunting small game. It's hunting season now, so this will apply. But I really didn't deer hunt because my father didn't. We did a lot of small game hunting.

When I was in Saxonburg, serving a congregation north of Pittsburgh, one of my friends invited me to go deer hunting with him. He even had the rifle to provide me with, since I didn't have a deer hunting rifle. So I said "Sure! That would be great, I've never done that." Maybe I could have a deer on the top of my car.

So, I was really looking forward to this. I was really excited about it, eager, anticipating. And we went out there in the pre-dawn hours. He knew the spot and he positioned me right by a tree. He said "Just stand right here, with the tree right to your back." So I was actually kind of leaning back against the tree and then he went off to where he was going to be staying.

He said, "Just watch, because there's a little deer run down below you, something could come by."

Dawn breaks, I'm really excited, really anticipating the big moment. But time went on and on that morning. All I'm seeing is a few birds flying around and a squirrel. And so, I started losing some confidence, losing some hope that anything was going to be happening here. And I started feeling tired. It was a Saturday and I had thoughts of the next day's sermon on my mind. And I started slinking down on that tree, until the point where I was sitting. And you know what happened from there, right? I started nodding off. And I fell asleep.



I don't know what it was exactly that awakened me. But I woke up and there was a nice buck, right down ahead of me. I'm not sure how many points it had, but I'm thinking "Okay, what do I do now? This is an awkward position to shoot from." So I decided I was going to inch my way up that tree. And as I'm inching my way up that tree, I've been caught totally off-guard, trying to get my wits about me, trying to get off my shot. I'm inching my way up, the deer kind of startles a bit, I take a shot... I hit the tree above the deer. And the deer, no kidding, did one of these moves. As if to say "What are you trying to prove?". And then he just kind of wandered off while I'm fumbling around with the gun. I didn't even get another shot, suffice it to say that was my one and only attempt to deer hunt.

So, we can all be lax at times, as I was, when it comes to keeping awake. And yes, our Gospel lesson exhorts us to do just that. To stay alert. The point here is this: since no one knows the exact schedule for the end of this age and the coming of the Kingdom in its entirety, everyone should be ready at all times. Don't focus on plotting the end times, as some Christian groups do. We're about "incarnational theology": that God loved this world so much that God sent His son into the world, that the Son came into this world to live among us, to live with us, to take the sins of the world upon himself, and to die for us. Very, very involved in the world. And as Christians, we are called to be "incarnational people", people who are involved in the affairs of the world. People who are concerned about humanity. People who are trying to make a difference in this time and place, for people now and for posterity.

Ours is not an "escapist theology", where we simply sit around and pray about the heavenly delights and where we'll be after our time here in this world. That's not the point of Revelation either, this escapist thinking. The book of Revelation is commonly misunderstood. That last book of the Bible is an apocalypse. An apocalypse reveals what was previously hidden. And in this apocalyptic writing in Revelation, we have a device by which the author could lift his reader's eyes and spirits beyond the suffering that they were experiencing in the present time to the triumphant future promised to them.

There are people out there who try to use the book of Revelation to shock effect, to scare people. But that completely misses the point of the book. For the book really encourages hope. It encourages endurance while confirming that God is in control of history. Even when it appears God isn't, God is in control. Our text encourages ever-present faithfulness and watchfulness from you and from me. From all of us.

This we stress during Advent. Advent: of course, it's the name of our church. In the word "Advent" means "coming". The theme during this season, as we shared with the children, is hope, symbolized by the blue paraments. Now there's actually a focus on not just one, or even one or two, but three comings of Our Lord during Advent. One, of course, is that annual celebration that we call Christmas, when Jesus Christ came into the world a couple of milleniums ago, as the Christ child.

We do focus on that coming. We also focus on the Consummation, Our Lord's second coming. But there's a third coming that we also focus on during Advent. That is Our Lord's present coming to us, coming to us in Word and Sacrament, remembering that our God is Alpha and Omega, beginning and ending, past present, and future. God is with us.



The first two Sundays of this season feature the parousia, the second coming, or as the New Testament likes to put it, Jesus appearing.

The third Sunday centers on John the Baptist as the herald of Christ, and the fourth Sunday on Mary, the mother of our Lord, that obedient servant chosen to bear the Christ child.

In this indeterminate period of time before the second coming of our Lord, we live in- think again of the Advent theme!- hope. We're loved. We're called. We're sent. Sent trusting in God's sovereignty and benevolence. Sent engaging in worship, as you are doing right now. Devotions, confession, study, reaching out in love toward others. During this time we're sent proclaiming the Gospel and not speculating about the end times.

And in this indeterminate period of time before our Lord's coming, we serve our Lord, who loves those who are suffering in our world. He calls us to love them and to help them in their human condition. And through all of this, all this stuff that we were sent to do, we rejoice knowing that God is Emmanuel, as we sang in our first hymn. It's a key word this season. God is Emmanuel.

He is with us now, as our second lesson shows. So, don't focus on the what, where, or when of Christ's return. For Mark, today's gospel writer- and we'll read much of Mark over the next liturgical year- for Mark, the hour is actually now. It's right now. The life of the Christian should be lived as if the time were now. And certainly, from an individualistic standpoint, we all know that our own time can end at the next heartbeat or breath. So we live then in anticipation.

Anticipation means staying awake, keeping alert, keeping watchful. To have faith means, for our purposes today, simply to stay faithful in each moment and to live responsibly in the interim between Christ's coming. We are called to live each day in service to our Lord so that, when we are face-to-face with God on the judgement day, God may just look at us and say "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have run the good race." So let us rejoice in our Lord's presence in our very lives. And let's live, work, and play like we really believe it when we say that we are children of God and recipients of God's amazing promises.

Amen.