

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent 2014 1B
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“And what I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake!”

These are the last words that Jesus leaves us with, today – the first day of Advent. The Church begins a new year today. The green vestments are gone, and we're moving into a new cycle of readings. Last year, the Gospel lessons were taken from Matthew. This year we're moving on to Mark, and the very first reading from this new gospel can only be described as rather ominous.

While it ends with that warning – Keep awake – our reading opens with a vision of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven sending forth his angels to gather his elect on the Day of Judgment. And it's that image, that picture of Jesus arriving for the judgment, which gives this season its name. The word “Advent” is a Latin word that means the “coming toward,” the approach. And, for as long as we have kept records of what Christians were reading, this gospel image or its parallel form Matthew or Luke has served to kick off the Advent season. This is the coming of Christ in power and great glory to judge the living and the dead. Just as we celebrated Christ the King last Sunday and heard about his division of those gathered before him into the sheep and the goats, it's really hard to hear this passage without wondering just how we would stack up.

When I'm not out supply preaching or keeping up with my husband and our two girls, I serve as a chaplain at St. Joseph's Medical Center. As a result, this theme is one that's been on my mind quite a lot these last few weeks. Nobody expects to come into my ER. Nobody expects to find themselves flat on their back with tubes and wires going all over. This isn't the kind of thing that we usually plan for. I'm a healthy person, I eat right, I exercise – actually, I run marathons and triathlons. And yet, if I stop and think about it, I realize that this doesn't mean that I'm safe. That nothing is going to happen to me. This doesn't really protect me.

“Therefore keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come.”

Advent is a counter-cultural season. It asks us to stop and consider our end. Not many things do that in our world. It's that our culture doesn't like us to stop at all! We have all sorts of gadgets and busy-ness that are designed to fill our time. Our schedules are packed as tight as we can fill them so we can always be on the go, always on the move, heading on to the next thing without a moment to think.

Because – that can be scary – that moment to think. What is the busy-ness adding up to? What are we accomplishing with the time that we’ve been given? Thinking about our mortality reminds us to make our time count. It reminds us that if we only have a certain amount, then we need to live it like we mean it.

St. Benedict, the great sixth-century monastic teacher, said it like this: “Keep death daily before your eyes.” He was encouraging his monks to daily remember their own mortality, their own coming end, and to fight off that all-too-human tendency to forget, to bury that unpleasant reality under a host of other cares and concerns: Stay intentional about how you live. Keep death daily before your eyes. Stay awake, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

But you know what? That’s not the end. That’s not all there is. There’s more in his Scripture than that. Keeping awake because your end is near is important – but there’s another half that it needs to make it complete and to really make it make sense.

Death is unexpected. No matter how much you prepare for it you can never really be ready. When you’re aware of it, it seems like there’s so much stuff to do that’ll not get done on time. You’re ever just moments away from your life changing forever. And, sometimes, you just can’t wait until it happens. I once had this conversation with my husband – about these characteristics of death – because I’d discovered a great paradox. These characteristics aren’t just about death – they’re about life too. Because when I had this conversation with him about nine years ago now, I was forty weeks pregnant with our second daughter.

Birth – at that point at least – is unexpected. No matter how much you prepare for it you can never really be ready. When you’re aware of it, it seems like there’s so much stuff to do that’ll not get done on time. You’re ever just moments away from your life changing forever. And, sometimes, you just can’t wait until it happens. And sitting there right around my due date, I was so ready for it to happen! Keep awake – for birth is unexpected too.

At St. Joseph’s I’m reminded of this because the custom there is that, whenever a baby is born, they’ll play the opening bars of Brahms’ Lullaby over the loudspeakers. I can be talking with a doctor or charting a patient visit – or holding the hand of someone who is dying – and the music will come across, reminding us all that, wherever we are, no matter what state we’re in, we are in the presence of new life.

If we're only keeping awake because death is on its way, then we're missing something. If we're living life like we mean it just because the time is short, then we're doing the right thing for an incomplete reason.

Life is an amazing, beautiful gift. New birth is an amazing, beautiful gift. And it's a crime to miss the beauties and glories of the life God has given us because we're motivated only by a fear of death. We need to embrace just as fully a love of life! To rewrite St. Benedict for a moment: **Keep life** daily before your eyes. Keep its beauties, its wonders, its mysteries, its fascinations as real and as central as the reality of its ending. I want to keep awake, not just because my time is short, but so I don't miss the laughter of my daughters or the warmth of my cats as they cuddle up beside me.

Keep death daily before your eyes. But just as earnestly, just as seriously, keep life daily before your eyes as well. For just as death is unexpected yet always with us, birth is also unexpected yet constantly breaking forth if we take the time to notice it, if we just listen for the music. And, really, holding these two things together in tension and in relation is what the season of Advent is really about.

Advent Is about Christ coming towards us. It's not just about judgment; it's also about hope. During Advent we sit and wait with Israel as they waited for the birth of the Messiah. As we keep Advent, we don't just keep our eyes fixed on the horizon waiting for the Son of Man; we're also looking towards Bethlehem and fixing our eyes on the cradle. We're waiting for birth, for life, for the hope that we've been told to expect so that we can see it unfold within our own lives. With the waiting Israel, we practice hope; we learn to expect the God who has promised that he will come.

Spiritual writers throughout the ages have found these two themes, birth and death, judgment and new promise, uniting in a third movement of Christ's coming. A medieval monk named Peter once said it like this: "There are three comings of our Lord: the first in flesh, the third at the judgment, the second in our souls. The first coming was humble and hidden, the third will be majestic and terrible, the second is mysterious and full of love. In the first he came as the Lamb; in the third he will come as a Lion; in the one in between, he comes as the tenderest of friends."ⁱ

This Advent, we watch for Christ to come and to be born within our own souls. But – it takes careful watching. I don't know if you saw this or not, but our first reading talks about the hiddenness of God: "You have hidden your face from us." Our second reading, from First Corinthians, made reference to the same kind of thing: that we wait for "the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." But – here's the thing: the problem isn't with God. The problem is us. God wants to be known by

us. God wants to be found. The issue is whether we're watching and waiting, seeking and finding. Mark tells us that we should know what to look for. "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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates."

He's telling us that we know the signs. Just as we know that the summer is coming by new life coming back to the trees, so too we will know the time of his coming when we see new life springing forth. But we have to be looking for it.

This is counter-cultural. Advent is counter-cultural. Our society is telling us to be busy, busy, busy – it's time to buy, buy, buy. But – stop. Wait. Watch. Christ is calling to us. He comes, mysterious and full of love; he comes as the tenderest of friends. But we have to watch and be attentive. We need to make a practice of living in the moment. We can't focus on the past or on the future. Only by really paying attention to the present moment will we find him. This is the present moment. It's the only one we have. And it's so easy to let it slip by us. We have so many things to distract us, to divert us, to take our attention.

This Advent, let us cultivate attentiveness. Let us keep watch like we mean it. Let us keep both death and life before our eyes but, most of all, let us live in the moment and see Christ be born in us, in our hearts and souls. We need to keep watch so that this precious present moment doesn't slip away.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, who teaches us to number our days in wisdom: grant us courage to live each moment as it passes, attention to see your face in the world around us, and hope to help you bring your kingdom to birth within us; through Jesus Christ our Lord who was, who is, and who is to come, who with you and the Holy Spirit is One God, now and forever. Amen.

ⁱ Peter of Blois (c. 1130 – c. 1211) *Third Advent Sermon*