

12.3.2023 Advent 1

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Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:32-37

“Keep Awake”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus’ words, “*Keep awake*,” are the traditional theme for the first Sunday of Advent. An older translation is simply the word, “*Watch*.” The idea of keeping awake, watching and waiting seems strangely out of season with the cultural Christmas that surrounds us.

Advent is the start of a new church year. It causes me to ask, “What time is it in your life?” Jesus’ words about the fig tree remind us not only of the year’s seasons, but also of the seasons of our lives. Jesus says, “*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.*” When my wife and I served a church in southern Japan in the 1990s, we had a fig tree in the church yard. The appearance of its large leaves and green fruit always meant that we would soon enjoy juicy ripe figs during fellowship after worship in summer.

The appearance of Christmas decorations and seemingly endless holiday channel music is a sign that not only is our yearly cultural calendar changing, but we are also a people who await the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. Advent means we are also people who “Watch” and “Keep awake” because Christ is near. So as the year 2023 begins to end and we are faced with deadlines, holiday planning, and of course, some necessary attempt at summarizing another year, Advent also begins with swiftness urging us to look further into the future and more closely at each day. Advent is about hoping in God’s future and acting for Christ today.

Today we light one candle on the Advent wreath as a sign that the true light that enlightens every human being is coming into the world. This light is the light of faith and grace that even death cannot extinguish. The true light shines in this world offering hope when all seems lost, when death and war have distorted the human spirit. The light of Christ allows us to watch, to hope, and to act for good when all seems to be darkness and madness.

Mark’s gospel also begins with swiftness and urgency. There is no nativity narrative, no story of the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, or the shepherds. Rather, Mark seems to be in a hurry to let the reader know that the day of the Lord Jesus Christ has come upon the world. Mark’s gospel begins with the same imagery as the prophet Isaiah, who wrote, “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.*” At Jesus’ baptism in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, Mark writes

that as Jesus came up out of the water, *“he saw the heavens torn open, and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.”* This in-breaking of God into human history is symbolized even in our own sanctuary as the font shaped as a dove, always present and hovering above us – reminding us to look upward, to watch for the advent of Christ in our lives. To be baptized is to live to Christ, always watching, always awake. To be baptized is to know that Christ has appeared in my life with great power and glory.

Advent begins by restating with great clarity as well as mystery the themes of the life of faith. Anyone who says that the Christian faith is crystal clear is not watching. Jesus says, *“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come.”* Even the Son does not know the hour. Not knowing the means walking with an unknowing about God. That the Son does not know, means that we also wait and watch with Christ. Let your faith cling to your baptism as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen.

Paul’s words to the Corinthians are also words for us: *“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind.”* To watch and keep awake means relying upon grace. Paul writes that God will strengthen you to the end of your life so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Keeping awake is about watching with Christ for the future and living and acting with Christ today.

Yet there are those in this world who accuse God in general and Jesus in particular of not showing up in the world, of not coming on clouds with great power and glory to end human suffering and misery. I have always thought that this complaint was a bit of a cop out because God also expects us to do the good, we know we should do. God has given, as Paul writes, humanity grace to work with speech and knowledge of every kind.

Paul goes so far as to say, *“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.”* Partnership with Christ is *koinonia*, meaning fellowship with Christ. It is participation with Christ’s watching and acting in this world. To be a disciple of Christ, to be a person of faith is one who daily lives in partnership with Christ. God does show up in this world through the work of many who watch and act in *koinonia* with Christ.

And so, Advent begins swiftly after the last day of the church year, Christ the King Sunday last week. On Christ the King, we remembered that Jesus expects the nations and its peoples to care

for “*the least of these*” (Mt. 25:31-46). Partnership with Christ means that our faith is to be awake in this world to the needs of others whom Jesus calls “*members of my family*.” Faith is given to us to be awake to the oppression, hatred, and sinful brokenness around us. In baptism, we are made heirs and partners with Christ “so that,” as Paul writes, “*you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ*.” Waiting and being awake are not a passive activity, but the active expression of an active God in our lives.

The familiar hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” that we sing today reminds us of – “God with us” – Emmanuel. We watch and keep awake for Emmanuel, God with us, so that we can be Christ with others.

Imagine a world beyond the divisions of religion, politics, economics, and nations. Imagine a world where people truly cared for and worked with one another no matter their ethnicity, nationality, gender, identity, or politics. Advent calls us to watch and act with Christ Jesus, the Messiah in this world.

Keep awake. Christ is near. He is alive and will watch, lead and act through you. Amen.