

“Stay Awake”

Matthew 24:36-44

For the past few weeks our Gospel readings have been focusing on the End Times. That is what we do at the end of the church year. At first, it seems quite curious that a Gospel lesson which could easily be used on the final Sunday of the Church year also applies to the First Sunday of Advent; the first Sunday of the Church year. This is Advent, we are only weeks away from Christmas, and the Gospel lesson is from Matthew chapter 24; the end of Jesus' ministry? And Jesus is talking about the final day and hour no one knows except our Father in heaven.

We are in Advent. Pentecost Season is over. Thanksgiving is over; Christmas decorations are in all the stores (of course Wal-Mart started putting them up in September, but that is an entirely different issue). Some of the Christmas decorations have already been put up here in our church. Why aren't we talking about Christmas things?

We aren't talking about Christmas things because this is Advent, and it's time to talk about Advent things. Christmas is the celebration of the coming of the Christ child at Bethlehem. The Advent season is when we prepare for the reality that Christ is coming. For which coming of Christ is

the Advent Season a time of preparation? His first coming in Bethlehem, or His second coming on the Last Day? It's a trick question. The Advent Season points forward to both.

During the Advent Season, we will spend plenty of time talking about John the Baptist and his ministry. We will tell the story of Mary and Joseph, and we will be led along that journey to Bethlehem. In our midweek Advent services, we will focus on the words of Mary as she visited Elizabeth.

However, the Advent Season is not just a count-down of the shopping days left until Christmas. Advent is the time of preparing for the coming of Christ. As Christians living in the days following the death and resurrection of Jesus, He tells us to "stay awake"; be prepared for His return, or for the Lord to call you out of this life. We do not know the day or hour we will meet our Lord face to face.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, tells the world to wake up. He says, "The hour has come for you to wake from sleep...The night is far gone (it is nearly over); the day is at hand."

During the past few weeks, as the Church year came to a close, we spent a good deal of time talking about the End Times and the need for preparing for the coming Day of Judgment. As we begin Advent, our focus changes, but only a little. We are going to spend a few weeks looking back at that miraculous event when God, the Creator of this world and the Author of life, entered into the world as a child in the womb of Mary. The Son of

God takes on human flesh so that He can be the second Adam and restore everything that Adam destroyed.

As we spend these weeks looking back at this most miraculous event, we never stop looking forward to the next time that Christ will visibly enter into the world. The next time that Christ comes, He is not going to present Himself as a child. He is not going to spend years walking and talking among us. He does not need to suffer once again. His sacrifice was complete. “It is finished!” He says from the cross.

The next time that Christ comes, He is not going to suppress His divine power. He is going to display it for all the world to see. He is going to enter the world to the sound of the trumpets of angels, He will be seen in all His glory, and all of creation will witness the power of God.

Christ says: “Therefore stay awake (keep watch), because you do not know the day or hour your Lord is coming.” He says this to prepare His disciples. He follows this with a somewhat shocking comparison of His return with a thief breaking into your house at night.

For those who are spiritually asleep, who are neither watching nor prepared, Christ’s second coming will be even more unwelcome than an act of midnight burglary by an unexpected thief. For many people, Judgment Day will not be a pleasant day. Therefore, we need to be awake, we need to be watching, and we need to be prepared, because “the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Last Sunday, we had our Preparing Our Hearts for Advent gathering. I spoke for a few minutes and focused on the time when Mary visited Elizabeth and John the Baptist leaped for joy in her womb. What I focused on was how ancient writers used a style of writing with parallel or repeated concepts which direct your attention to what is most important. I mean, what puts you in the holiday mood more than studying grammatical nuances of ancient Greek literature?

The point I made is that the center focus of the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth are Elizabeth's words, "blessed is the fruit of your womb." The focus, the most important character or person is not Mary, Elizabeth, or even John the Baptist leaping in the womb, even though that gets the most text. What the Gospel of Luke tells you is that the focus, the most important thing in this entire story is that Jesus, the Son of God is in the womb of the virgin, just as God promised.

This is true of every hour of every day of your life. The most important thing happening to you right now or at any moment going forward is the reality that the Son of God entered the world as the child of Mary, fulfilled His task as the second Adam, and He is coming once again. Stay awake! Keep watch! Be prepared! And rejoice! The advent of our Lord is upon us. Amen.