

## *Stay awake!*

First Sunday of Advent (Yr. B), November 29, 2020

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*Jesus said to his disciples, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see `the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. 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. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 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. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." - Mark 13:24-37*

Today, the First Sunday of Advent, ushers in a new year in the life and calendar of the church. But it hardly feels like a new year, does it? We've contended with diverse restrictions for over eight months now. We'd all like a fresh start, a new chapter. But that still seems premature. The best we can do, it seems, is to persevere.

Temporal circumstances aside, we partly know it's a new year in the church by a change of Gospels, from Matthew to Mark. But again, the change is hardly noticeable. Today's text from Mark hardly takes us in a new direction. This text and the recent Sunday gospel readings from Matthew are all, in fact, drawn from the last earthly days of Jesus, in Jerusalem. Antagonism with the religious authorities continues to escalate and will soon turn deadly.

These last teachings of Jesus frequently imagine the end of the world, God's final judgment, the vanquishing of evil and the redemption of the truly faithful: "...they will see `the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.'

Similar themes have already been brought to our attention on recent Sundays by way of ten bridesmaids, and three slaves entrusted with talents, and the naming and separating of sheep and goats. Advent is partly a season in which we are called to affirm, contemplate and prepare for Christ's return and the ordeals and reversals that may precede or accompany it. We often use the word apocalyptic to describe these sorts of readings.

In the verses preceding today's passage, we learn that Jesus is at the Mount of Olives, where he will be betrayed a few nights hence. This teaching is framed as a response to Peter, James and John, who had come to him 'privately.' (13:3) This private context elicits private counsel that begins part way through today's reading and intensifies through to the end. "From the fig tree learn its lesson." Learn, in other words, to be a reader of signs. And then in the final several verses, Jesus repeats one short admonition three times: "Keep alert. Keep awake. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

I have often in the past believed that these injunctions were mainly about seeing, consciousness, or even interpretation of signs *à la* the fig tree. And to be sure these meanings are consistent with the context and with the original Greek language here. We may naturally and rightly be led to wonder, in response, how it is that we are to wake up to, or to ‘stay awake’ – to more alertly and closely examine – some approaching danger or change or decision.

Two additional features of these verbs may bring this teaching closer to home for us. First, language scholars frequently emphasize that these verbs are typically meant to be more active than passive. And second, the tense of these verbs in the original language indicates ongoing action. Jesus is not urging us to wake up *per se*. He’s urging us to *stay awake*.

With these things in mind, it may be fine that you once were born again or saved the day or led the way or had the profound ‘Aha!’ or were known for seeing a need and faithfully responding. All good. And now: do it again, and again, and again. Keep alert. Keep awake. Keep awake. And do so until I return, whenever that may be.

It may be fair to say that Jesus is here commending what in popular psychological terms we now call resilience. Before our time and psychology, New Testament writers were similarly commending *perseverance*. They wrote of it so often and so meaningfully that perseverance became known in time as a *charism*, a unique gift of the Holy Spirit.

Keeping alert, keeping awake, perseverance is what I read into an email I received on Friday from a decades-long Ascension member, reflecting on the past months and what it’s been like to take on a new ministry of leading one of the Daily Offices that we are sharing virtually:

*We have all been on the road with our Lord to Jerusalem and hopefully this coming year we will walk with him through Holy Week and Resurrection. It has not been easy. For many Zoom does not cut it. [Those in] my group have been faithful. I am fulfilled by their steadfastness and by their faith. I took [this] on ... because there was a need. But I have been filled by their faith.*

And this in turn brings to mind the Mary Stein poem that I shared in the parish newsletter this past week. Themes in the poem partly seemed to address our ongoing circumstances with regard to the pandemic. But the same lines may also serve as a commentary on the personal counsel of Jesus in today’s gospel teaching:

*the things we desire will elude us.  
And our efforts will pose as failure.  
And we will not recognize  
how far we’ve come.  
And we will solve one problem and create another.  
And we will feel broken. And we will not be broken ....  
And we will keep saying, “I don’t know how to do this.”  
And we will be more capable than we ever imagined.*

In today’s teaching from Mark, Jesus anticipates Apocalypse – with a Big A, the end of all things. Jesus also knows the small ‘a’ apocalypses of tragedy and loss that may overcome any of us, anytime, or that may arise at any time in the course of human history, whether from war, famine, pandemic or more. In the midst of his own gathering storm, Jesus takes time alone with those closest to him. He urges them, and us, to persevere: *Keep alert. Keep awake. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. Amen.*