**The First Sunday in Advent** **December 3, 2023**

**"Stay Awake"**

*Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." (Mark 13:35-37).*

I never wanted to be a pastor. After four years of teaching at Concordia High School, Emmanuel called me to serve as the Director of Youth and Family Ministry. Art Klausmeier was the Pastor when I came to Emmanuel and, as I said in his funeral sermon last month, Art knew me better than I knew myself. So, somewhat insidiously, he began having me do pastor stuff, and one of my duties in those days was to assist with worship on Sundays. I read the lessons and led the prayers, and as I look back, these were formative experiences as the Lord slowly moved me down the path to becoming a pastor.

As I considered today's text, I was reminded of one particular Sunday when I was scheduled to help with the early service. We had been visiting Sonya's family, and for some foolish reason we didn't get back to Fort Wayne until two or three in the morning. I grabbed a few hours of sleep and stumbled into church a little after seven for my morning duties. As Pastor Art and I prepared for the service in the vestry, I was obviously tired and already fighting to stay awake and, in an attempt to make light of my self-induced plight, I turned to Pastor Art and, half joking, said, "If I close my eyes this morning during your sermon, I'm praying." Without missing a beat, and without smiling, Art shot back, "If you close your eyes during my sermon today, you'd better pray." Needless to say, I was highly motivated to stay awake during Pastor Art's message.

"Stay awake!" That is exactly what we hear in today's reading from Mark. Here, Jesus is describing the unexpected coming of the end. He uses some of the same language that we heard in last week's lesson from Matthew as He describes the Second Coming, when 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." Jesus is then careful to say, "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come." Then, to make sure that His disciples understand what He's telling them, Jesus turns to a simple one-sentence parable: "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake." Again, to be sure they know that He's talking about them, Jesus pulls them into the parable with this warning, "Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!"

Sleep is used as a metaphor throughout the Bible, and it can be understood in several different ways. Sleep is used to illustrate death, and it's used as a figure of speech to help us understand the perils of unbelief, and it's also used to describe willful disobedience. So, with all of these uses of "sleep" in the Bible, how do we apply Jesus' warning to stay awake? Well, we can start by eliminating what it doesn't mean, and one thing that we can take off the table is the idea that simply doing the right things will keep us awake. Isaiah's words in today's Old Testament reading destroy this false application when they proclaim, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6).

Here, God makes it clear that spiritually staying awake involves much more than merely doing the right things. Our actions are important, but simply trying to improve our behavior and point God's eyes to the "good" things we think we've done doesn't begin to rouse us out of our sinful sleep. In fact, pride in what

*we've* done is exactly the sin for which Jesus attacked the Pharisees, and if self-righteousness is our answer to Jesus' command to watch, then we will only fall deeper into the sleep we are warned against.

So, if spiritual wakefulness isn't found in good works, how should we respond to Jesus' words of warning? St. Paul speaks to this question when he writes, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For…everything exposed by the light becomes visible…This is why it is said: Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Ephesians 5:8-14). In these words, God is telling us that to be awake is to live a life of repentance, to "expose" the fruitless deeds of darkness, to be honest with God about who we really are, to turn from our sin, and to be reconciled – first with God and then with each other. But so often that is not what we do.

We hold grudges. We file hurts away only to pull them out later and use them as weapons of vengeance when the time is right. We have not sought reconciliation with our brother or sister, and we are much more comfortable in taking pride in the good we think we do instead of exposing our "deeds of darkness." This pride is repulsive to God, and it is damning for us, and it is to our unrepentant and proud hearts that Jesus speaks.

In today's text, Jesus attacks this part of our sinful nature with full force. He blasts our stubborn self-righteousness, and He pries our hands away from the pride to which we fatally cling. Jesus' words here are not pointless platitudes with no meaning for our lives today. His words are serious, life-or-death warnings. They are meant to shake us up and alert us to the trouble and terror that we face if we insist on holding on to our sin. Today, Jesus puts heaven and hell before us, and He pleads with us to repent; to be reconciled with God; to forgive the people who have wronged us, and to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged. In this first week of Advent, Jesus reminds us that this life is short and that there is no time for pride. If we put off repentance another day, we have a day more to repent of, and a day less to repent in; and this truth is of the utmost importance because without repentance, we are left holding on to our sin, and we will face condemnation, and that is not the future that God wants for us.

It's important to note that in today's text, Jesus is speaking to His disciples. He is speaking to men God had chosen and through whom He would lay the foundation of the Church. You would think that if anyone would be awake and ready, it would be these men. And yet, as we saw in the days following Jesus' clear and stern warning, each of these men fell asleep while the reality of Jesus' suffering and death unfolded. Whether by blatant betrayal or abject abandonment, these men slept while Jesus suffered, and alone on the cross Jesus died for them…and for us.

You see God's desire is to forgive. God's desire is to save. God's desire is that we would repent of our sins, turn from our pride, and receive the gifts that Christ died to give us. God wants us to be with Him in heaven, He has done everything to make it happen, and because He died in our place and took the punishment we deserved, today He pleads with us to repent, to wake from our sleep, and to watch as God's promise is kept.

"Stay awake!" This is the cry of Advent! This is the plea of our Savior! And this call to repentance is the beginning of our life as God's people! Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold