

Matthew 24:36-44 and Romans 13:11-14

Stay awake! Jesus admonishes us to keep awake. Every Christmas, the time is ripe for meeting Christ anew. Don't fall asleep! Keep watch for his presence among us! "I am sittin' among you to watch," Sojourner Truth, a quite famous runaway slave turned abolitionist, once said, "and every once and a while I will come out and tell you what time of night it is." (Quoted by James K.A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time*.) Entering the Advent season invites us to that sort of watching — a reminder that the world's fleeting pace may end, but Jesus' words shall never pass away.

Here we are at our first Sunday of Advent. We have heard a passage from the gospel of Matthew that sounds quite a bit like a passage we heard two weeks ago from the gospel of Luke. Jesus is talking about the end of this world. Why would we begin with that reading the first Sunday of Advent? Again, it is because we need to know why we have an Advent season to prepare for the birth of Jesus and await his second coming. As we believers know Christmas is not about the wrappings, the decorations, the bows, Christmas is about celebrating the birth of the man who is going to save humanity.

So how do we prepare? First of all we begin by staying aware of our surroundings. Not in a way that is born from fear, but in a way that comes from love. Where can we help out? What can we do that will help someone at this time of year? Who do we see that is struggling with their losses and needs a little human touch? Can we call a friend whom we know is struggling? Can we gift someone a warm smile? Be aware of the circumstances of those who are near you.

To so many people this time of year is filled with expectations, some of them completely unreachable. Perhaps another way of preparation is to lower our standards of what we believe Christmas should be, and appreciate what is. Instead of baking six or seven different types of cookies (yes, my mother baked that many cookies every year), choose two of your favorites. Not only did my mother bake that many different types of cookies, but her cut out cookies were decorated to a T. Santa had fur on his coat and toys in his sack. The trees had ornaments and a star on top. The reindeer had dark brown antlers and hoofs with light brown bodies. If that's you, and you're feeling overwhelmed this year, try just icing them and decorating them with sugar, if at all; they'll taste just as good. That way you will be available for all the other activities going on in your home. You'll be aware of something you may otherwise have missed.

Jesus said, "But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into." Every time I think of a thief breaking into a house, I think about the time my sister's apartment was broken into. She was so sick she could barely function, so a friend was staying with her. In the middle of the night the bedroom window opened, and a man was going to crawl through the window, but her friend scared the man away. Come to find out, the thief had been in her home some time earlier and taken money from an envelope in her dresser drawer and had returned that night. Had her friend not been aware and listening for my sister to stir, that man could have gotten into her apartment again that night.

But that's not the kind of thief I think Jesus is talking about when he talks about the owner of the house. I think he's talking about evil, or the devil. If we aren't vigilant, if we aren't keeping ourselves connected to God, the devil can play tricks on us. Believe me, the devil knows scripture and knows how to twist it to make us believe it is saying

something other than what the writer meant. The devil can help us believe what isn't true, and he can do it simply by twisting scripture. Remember how he tempted Jesus in the wilderness? Jesus knew the scriptures and would not allow the devil to take control. We must be as vigilant to keep the thief away. Why would Jesus refer to him as a thief? Because he wants to steal our soul from God, to turn us in another direction that isn't Christ like.

In our reading from Romans Paul advises it is time to wake up. It's time to turn from human ways to the way of Jesus. What else did Jesus do other than feeding and healing people? He spoke to them of the kingdom of God. If we don't know enough about the kingdom of God to talk about it maybe it's time for us to wake up and hear what Jesus has been saying. Perhaps that should be our personal Advent goal, to learn the places in the gospel readings where Jesus discusses the kingdom of God and what it is like... his words don't sound like there are halos and clouds. Readings in Luke tell us that Jesus said the kingdom of God is like mustard seeds and leaven (Luke 13:18-21). The gospel of Mark tells us that it is like a man who scatters seeds (Mark 4:26-29). And Jesus also says in Luke 17:20-21 when the Pharisees ask the time the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Paul tells us to wake up and pay attention, "for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers." We've been here before, working our way toward Christmas. It is easy to simply go through the motions, expecting nothing out of the ordinary to happen. Paul commands us to wake up, pay attention; "the night is far gone," God is at work in our lives and in our world. We will not want to miss anything due to our distractions by the things of the world.

As we focus or refocus on Jesus we reject the "works of darkness." There is evil in our world, causing us at times to stumble and fall, yet Paul instructs believers to live in the light of Christ. The light of Christ dispels the darkness. Paul uses the metaphor of suiting up with the "armor of light." The armor of light will provide protection as we confront the evil powers and injustices of this world. We dress in the armor of light to shine brightly through the darkness of evil. We do so knowing that ultimately Christ will prevail over the darkness of evil.

We strive to follow the positive command to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" rejecting works of the flesh that hamper our relationship with Jesus. Our enemies are "not flesh and blood" but rather the destructive power that enslave and divide people -- mistrust, injustice, addictions, thirst for revenge, prejudice, fear, and greed.

Wake up, pay attention, and put on the "armor of Light" that will transform and change all aspects of our lives, including how we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth in our lives. Advent is about turning to something far better than what is left behind.

The first Sunday of Advent is about waking up from our slumber to pay attention to God's Word for us as we prepare to receive God's gift once again. We wait for that glorious day when Jesus shall return. Meanwhile we continue doing those things that Jesus would want us to do, loving and caring for others, confronting evil in our lives.

The apostle Paul asks us if we know what time it is. Our response is that today and every day is God's time -- it is the time for us to pay attention and to celebrate a Savior who can and does change lives. All glory be to God.