

“Be Watchful Of The Time”

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus on this weekend when we close out our Thanksgiving celebration and begin preparing for the celebration of our Lord's birth.

This is one of those times in the year when, if you're not careful, it can sneak up on you and catch you off guard. With all of the things that need to happen between now and Christmas, we have to stay focused (even here at the church) if we're going to get everything done we hope to have done.

It's also one of those times (more apparent than others) when what we're doing here (in the church) is so much different than what's being done (out there) in the world. Although very much the same, (at least insofar as) it all has to do with Christmas, the things we do and why we do them (in contrast) are so different.

We're preparing for the same day, but we're getting ready for different events. We're doing many of the same things, but we're doing them for different reasons.

The one has to do with the celebration of a day. The other has to do with the celebration of a person. The one has to do with an event that is (pretty much) the same from one year to the next. The other has to do with an event that has left our world never the same again. The one has to do with tinsel and lights and the giving of gifts. The other has to do with a star and a multitude of angels and the greatest gift this world has ever known.

It's always struck me, on this first Sunday in Advent, what we consider to be the beginning of a new year in the life of the Church, rather than looking back on where this all started (to the birth of Jesus), what we do instead is look forward to where this is (all going) and the day when he will return.

I don't know about you, but I always feel a bit uncomfortable when I see one of those “street-corner preachers” standing with a sign that says Jesus is coming back, so we need to be ready. It always seems so out of place, makes the rest of us (in the church) appear to be so strange. I also find myself wondering, in spite of how strange it might seem, why we actually don't spend more time with that message than we do.

The reality is that day is coming. History is linear. There was a beginning and there will be an end. Jesus will return. And when he does (if we're not ready), it'll be too late.

Mark, chapter 13, (Jesus says), “Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away who leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.” (And then he says), “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back...whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

It's interesting, in the Bible, how everything that's said is said for a reason. The words aren't randomly chosen. They're chosen with a communication purpose in mind. They're trying to tell us something.

Every time I've read this passage before, I've thought about how the listing of those times, (in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn), that they were nothing more than telling us that Jesus could come back at any time, so that (no matter what the time) we need to be ready. And maybe that's why they were chosen. Maybe that's all they are trying to do...but what if it's not?

What if there was a greater reason for choosing those particular words? What if Jesus (in Mark's gospel) is trying to tell us more than simply the fact that we need to be ready for his return at any time? Everything that is said is said for a reason. “In the evening, at midnight, when the rooster crows, or at dawn?” Let's start with the evening.

In the very next chapter we find the story of the Last Supper. Chapter 14, Mark tells us “When it was evening, Jesus arrived with the twelve. While they were at the table eating, (Jesus said to them), ‘I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.’”

Evening (in Mark's gospel) is the time of betrayal. Just think about that for a moment. What would it mean for us (during this Advent season) to betray Jesus? Here we are in this time of waiting. Could it be a time of betrayal for us? Would it be a time of betrayal, if (somehow), during these next few weeks, we got so caught up in what's happening in the world that we failed to remember what really happened?

I still remember (back in the early 1990's), Mary and I had the chance to visit the Holy Land. One of the things that struck us (during our visit) was how commercial it had become. There we were, in Jerusalem, in Bethlehem, the Sea of Galilee. There were all these big hotels, fancy restaurants, tourist attractions. It seemed like everything was happening, there was a lot going on; but none of what was (going on) had anything to do with Jesus. We thought it would be different (in the Holy Land), in the very place where Jesus walked, but it wasn't.

Betrayal comes in many forms. It wasn't just the night of the Last Supper (with Judas) when Jesus was betrayed. Jesus is betrayed every night, by many people. What would it mean for us to betray our Lord?

Ignoring the needs of those around us? Giving in to the materialism that is such a big part of what's going on? Focusing too much of our time and energies on the peripherals of the season, instead of on the One to whom this season principally belongs?

Evening (in Mark's gospel) was a time of betrayal. Evening in today's world could easily be as well. "Therefore keep watch (Jesus says) because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back."

"In the evening, at midnight, when the rooster crows, or at dawn?" What about midnight? Could Jesus come back at midnight? Do you remember what happened at midnight?

Mark says, immediately after the Last Supper, "They went to a place called Gethsemane." Jesus told his disciples to keep watch while he prayed. Jesus went into the garden to pray.

Do you remember what happened? Three times, after asking them to "keep watch", Jesus returned to the disciples, and (each time) found them asleep. Mark says, "They did not know what to say to Jesus."

No wonder they didn't know what to say. The Master was pouring out his heart; (Jesus didn't want to die) the most critical night in his life, and what did his disciples do? They fell asleep.

One writer has said, "Instead of standing on the promises, they were sleeping on the premises." We smile, (when we hear it), in part, because it wasn't us. But what if it was? What would we have done?" What if it is? What are we doing?"

You know the saying. "He knows when you've been sleeping. He knows when you're awake." This isn't about Santa Claus. It's about Jesus. This isn't about being good (to get presents), but being alert and on watch, because that's what our Lord wants. I'm not saying it's not happening. I'm only asking the question.

In the evening, one of his disciples betrayed him. At midnight, they had all fallen asleep. "Keep watch, therefore," (Jesus said), "because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back...whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn."

We all know what happened when the rooster crowed. Even Peter, three times, denied that he even knew Jesus. That's when it happened. The rooster crowed. Mark tells us that (when it happened) "Peter broke down and wept."

Now, let me ask you a question. Have you ever wept because of what you've done with Jesus? Have you ever wept because of what you failed to do with this one who is your Lord?

I wish it hadn't happened, that Peter denied knowing Jesus. I wish it hadn't happened that I've been hesitant (at times) myself. It shouldn't happen, but it does. It happens every day. Do you think it could happen during Advent? Do you think it could happen to you?

Every time we have the opportunity, but fail to speak out. (It happens.) Every time we have the chance, but wait for a better chance. You can almost hear the rooster (in the background), if you listen.

It wasn't just Peter who denied Jesus. It wasn't just (back then); it happens even now. "Therefore keep watch (Jesus says) because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn."

Mark, chapter 16, (it says), "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise (at dawn), they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?'"

"When they got to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away and, going inside, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here."

Only some forty hours prior to this particular dawn, the world experienced the darkest hours of human history. The Son of God hung on a cross and became sin for us.

Have you ever noticed that, how Advent happens during the darkest days of the year? It's true. (That's when it happens; it's some of the darkest days of the year.) It's symbolic of the season.

It's also symbolic of the world, because darkness is our world's ongoing state, no matter what the time. It doesn't matter. This world is a dark place without Jesus.

But, at dawn, on the Sabbath, it all changed. The women discovered that the tomb (of Jesus) was empty. He had risen as he said. I'm glad there's a dawn in the Bible. I'm glad there's a dawn for us. And I'm glad (and I'm thankful) that one day Jesus will return.

In closing today, I want to read a poem (I came across) this past week that talks about the Advent season and about the importance of being ready. It's a spinoff on a more famous poem about Christmas. I was challenged by what it said, so I decided to share it. It's titled, "Twas the Beginning of Advent."

'Twas the beginning of Advent and all through the house
Our hope was all dying—children and spouse.
It wasn't so much that Christ wasn't invited,
But after 2,000 we were not quite as excited.

Oh, we knew what was coming-- no doubt about that.
And that was the trouble-- it was all just "old hat."
November brought the first of an unending series of pains
With carefully orchestrated advertising campaigns.

There were gadgets and dolls and all sorts of toys.
Enough to seduce the most devout girls and boys.
Unfortunately, it seemed, no one was completely exempt
From this seasonal virus that did all of us tempt.

The papers and websites and certainly the kings
Were all so consumed with the desire for "things!"
It was rare, if at all, that you'd hear of the reason
For the actual origin of this holy-day season.

A baby, it seems, once had been born
In the mid-east somewhere on that first holy morn.
But what does that mean for folks just like us,
Who've lost ourselves in the hoopla and fuss?

Can we re-learn the art of wondering and waiting,
Of hoping and praying, and anticipating?
Can we let go of all the things and the stuff?
Can we open our hands and our hearts long enough?

So many questions, unanswered thus far,
As wise men seeking the home of the star.
Where do we begin-- how do we start
To make for the child a place in our heart?

Perhaps we begin by first letting go
Of our limits on hope, and of the stuff that we know.
Let go of the shopping, of the chaos and fuss,
Let go of the searching, let Christmas find us.

With him he brings wholeness and newness of life

For brother and sister, for husband and wife.
The Christ-child comes not by our skill,
But rather he comes by his own Father's will.

We can't make him come with parties and trees,
But only by spending time on our knees.
He'll come if we wait amidst our affliction,
Coming in spite of, not by our restriction.

A basket on your porch, a child in your reach.
A baby to love, to feed and to teach.
He'll grow in wisdom as God's only Son.
How far will we follow this radical one?

He'll lead us to challenge the way that things are.
He'll lead us to follow a single bright star.
But that will come later if we're still around.
The question for now: Is the child to be found?

Can we block out commercials, the hype and the malls?
Can we find solitude in our holy church halls?
Can we keep alert, keep hope, stay awake?
Can we receive the child for ours and God's sake?

From on high with the caroling host as he sees us,
He yearns to find on our lips the prayer: Come, Lord Jesus!
As Advent begins, all these questions make plea.
The only true answer: We will see, we will see.

"Therefore, (Jesus says) keep watch, for you do not know when the owner of the house will come back...all you know for sure is that he is coming...for you." Amen.