



1st Sunday in Advent
“Keep Awake!”
Nov. 27, 2011

Prayer: Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it, O Lord, that in your words, in your presence, we may find the strength to keep awake. Amen.

Here we are. Having celebrated Thanksgiving and the early days of holiday shopping, we have arrived. We have arrived at the beginning of another church year, and the beginning of another church season. A season rich in meaning on so many different levels.

As we begin this morning, I need and want to ask each and every one of you: how is it with your soul? How are you finding yourself in your relationship with God and with one another over these past few days?

Perhaps, you are here this morning because you are in need of rest. The preparations of cooking, cleaning, and having guests for the holiday have left you caring for others, with little time for yourself. Maybe you have spent the past few days in early preparations for the birth of Christ: perhaps a little too much black Friday shopping, that leaves you this morning feeling perhaps tired, looking forward to returning to work tomorrow.

Prior to Thanksgiving, one of the commercials caught my attention. The commercial was for a store along Route 30, and how someone was training for their annual Black Friday sale. In one commercial, this person is standing next to a gingerbread replica of the store, waiting in anticipation for the sale. So excited is she with the upcoming sale she admits she hasn't slept in days. In this anticipation – and exhaustion -- she bursts into tears at the reality of how long she has been awake.

Exhaustion – whether mental, physical, or spiritual is not a pleasant place to be. Exhaustion is a depletion of strength, and resources. It is a depletion of time and energy. Exhaustion can take every remaining ounce of strength and patience just to live.

We may not always know when we are at our point of exhaustion. The indication of reaching our breaking point may come in ways we least anticipate or expect. When we do hit our point of exhaustion, it can catch us off guard. Once in college, I had several days in a row where I averaged three to four hours of sleep a night. During that time, a friend asked how I was. Through tears, I replied, “I’m fine”.

At times, our world appears to be running on the edge of exhaustion. There is always something to do, someplace to be, something new to learn. There is always so much to do, and seemingly less time to accomplish everything. We have access to instant media and instant news that can keep us connected twenty four hours a days, seven days a week. We can run ourselves ragged and exhausted merely by trying to keep up.

Sleep is a normal response when we are exhausted. Yet, as this season of Advent begins, Jesus' words jar us: "Keep awake!"

This is not something we necessarily want to hear at the start of Advent. After all, the world sees this time not as a time of waiting, but of a time of being too busy for our own good. The world sees this as a time where we need to do everything in order to have the "perfect" Christmas. Our list of holiday preparations seems far greater than the amount of remaining daylight we have. The days grow shorter. The nights grow longer – earlier and sooner than we anticipate.

We want Advent to begin with prophecies from other years, about the birth of John the Baptist, how John will prepare the way of the Lord, how the Lord will come, how a shoot from Jesse will bear forth fruit, how a virgin will bear a Son, how his name will be Emmanuel, meaning God with us.

But Mark on the other hand goes directly to the heart of the matter. For Mark, there are no previews, only the reality that we know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man will return. Because this is such an unknown, Mark is reminding his audience to keep awake, to be alert.

Perhaps, now, more than ever in this new season of Advent, we need Mark's words to remind us of what is indeed important this Advent season. Advent is not about the most presents, the most cookies, the most lights, the most decorations. Nor is it about running ourselves ragged to the point we find ourselves in tears over little things.

If we focus on those things, we lose sight of the reality that God has chosen to dwell with us, to be with us. We lose sight of the reality that God's coming in our lives comes in ways we least expect it to happen.

When we run ourselves ragged, we become tired, bored, and restless. We may fail to see God in our lives – not only in the big things, but also in the small things – the daily things we may fail to take notice of.

One of my colleagues has been known to ask the question, "how have you experienced God today?" It is a good question because it provides space to think, to reflect, to keep awake, to see how we have experienced God working in our lives.

Having said that, here is my Advent challenge: Take with you this morning the question, “how have you experienced God today?” Reflect on it with your hearts, your minds, your very being. Ask one another this question, whether over a meal, as you’re getting ready for school or work, as you’re preparing for Christmas, as we begin committee meetings over the next month. Ask your colleagues, your friends, your family who are not here how they have experienced God. You may be surprised at the answers you receive.

My hope, and my prayer, is that as we reflect on this question together, we may help keep one another awake this Advent season.

May God who is gracious and merciful grant us the strength and the courage to keep awake, today and always. *Amen.*