

The First Sunday of Advent • November 30, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Mark 13:24-37

"Awake!"

"Stay awake!" That's the message that Jesus says to his disciples and to all people at the close of today's text from Mark's gospel account: "*All y'all stay awake!*" if you want the full force of the Greek. The same chapter started with some of Jesus' closest disciples asking about things that were to come, including the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus, in answering their question, instructed them to be on guard for the events which would come to pass in Judea within the next forty years, that they might escape from the coming devastation. But he then goes on to tell them to keep awake – to be ready – for the coming of the Son of Man and the end of the world as we know it. Jesus doesn't give them a date, though; in fact, he tells them (and us) that no one besides the Father in heaven will know exactly when that Last Day will come. And so, Jesus calls us to stay awake and watch. Let's consider three mental images that might help us better understand what this "staying awake" is all about.

The first takes us back to this past Thursday. How'd you feel after the big Thanksgiving Day dinner? Some folks spent the morning working in the kitchen and around the house, preparing the feast and getting everything ready for the big meal. Yet more people enjoyed all the food that came to the table, so much so that they needed to loosen their belts a notch or two. But with the dinner done and digesting begun, couches around our nation served a traditional role in supporting drowsy bodies in an after-banquet crash.

"Postprandial Thanksgiving sedation," as one website calls it, is a lot like the struggle to stay awake that we experience as we seek to follow Christ each day. We might not always be physically tired or sleepy, but it may feel like we're living in a haze. Life seems to lack clarity. When you think about it, does your schedule at all resemble your plate at Thanksgiving dinner? So many things to try, so little space to fit them all in! In a fast-paced environment, we can overfill our calendar like we overfill our stomachs. Homework, exercise, family needs, games, clubs: we can take on so many responsibilities in the world that we fall asleep in our walk with God. Gobbling up a bunch of side dishes leaves no room for the main course! Alternatively, we may have grown so accustomed to a routine – like having the same dishes year after year after year – that we're just drowsily going through the motions, ungratefully using the time that we've been given. Even though our bodies may be awake, our spirits are napping.

This brings us to our second image, which is possibly one of mankind's greatest inventions: the snooze button. Elegant in its simplicity, yet profound in its impact, the snooze button has brought about the downfall of many an early-morning event. The alarm clock goes off: "Wake up! Wake up!" But you don't want to wake up. You're sleeping quite pleasantly, thank you very much. So the snooze button offers a compromise: nine more minutes of rest, then you're up. You groggily accept, reach out your hand, and slam the button down. All is well with the world, right? The problem comes when you want to renegotiate the deal after the nine minutes have passed. If you were one of the many people who went out for this year's "Black Friday" door-buster sales, how many times did you have to hit the snooze button at 4:00 AM?

Jesus told the disciples to be prepared for signs of the trouble that was coming to Jerusalem. As the emergence of the fig tree's leaves are a sign that summer is nearing, so should the sign of which Jesus spoke prompt the people of Judea to action. As we struggle to stay awake in our lives as Jesus' disciples, there may be events that jolt us out of our drowsiness, an alarm going off in life. These events could be dramatic, like a doctor's diagnosis or loss of a job; however, these wake-up calls can

also come in the day-to-day, as you go about your regular vocation, as you engage in a conversation with a friend, or as you read Scripture during daily devotions. (I encourage you to make use of an Advent devotional, including those from Lutheran Hour Ministries which are available in our congregation's narthex area.) We may hear the wake-up call, but all too often we don't want to stay awake. We're tempted to hit the "snooze button" and go back to the comfortable, sleepy haze of the way in which we'd been living. "Sure," we may tell ourselves, "I'll get up... later." Such drowsy living keeps us from making ready for Jesus' return.

Our third image is one of excited expectation. Picture two young brothers, one six years old, the other, four. In what is now only four short weeks away, young children like these around our nation will probably be up early in the morning, anxiously coming to their parents' bedside to say, "Wake up! Wake up! It's Christmas!" From their eager perspective, the children have been waiting for ages for this day to arrive. They're looking forward to the gifts under the tree or in stockings by the fireplace, even in those households which do not have Christ at the center of their Christmas. You'd be hard-pressed to figure out a way to put such kids back to bed – they are **awake!** Some families celebrate Christmas by exchanging gifts on Christmas Eve (which helps for the sleeping in on Christmas morning!), but our family observed this tradition on Christmas Day. As my brother and I grew older, though, getting up early became less and less of a mandate. Have your children yet reached an age where *you* have to wake *them* on Christmas Day?

Advent is indeed a time for preparation and repentance, a time to wake up where we have fallen asleep, but it can also be for us a season of excited expectation. It's a time for us to look ahead to the great day of the coming of the Son of Man. In that day, there will be no more wars, no more terrorist attacks, no more disasters. We won't have cancer or AIDS or broken bones. There will be no hunger, no poverty, no racism. Greed will be gone, along with hatred and suffering. The master of the house will return, and He will call to Himself all those whose names He has written in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. And there will be no more need to sleep, for Christ's awakened people will sing songs of joy and victory unceasingly.

I look forward to journeying through the days ahead with you in prayer, song, and worship as we stay awake together to prepare for the coming of our Lord. Welcome to the Advent season.

Amen.