

Good morning friends! A blessed **First Sunday of Advent** to each of you! Pastor Patti Axel here to bring you greetings from the Bishop's office and the Good News from the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Mark's Gospel. Listen for the Word of the Lord!

### **Mark 13:24-37**

### **Glory to You, O Lord**

<sup>24</sup> “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then 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.

<sup>28</sup> “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he<sup>[a]</sup> is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup> “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert;<sup>[b]</sup> for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

The Gospel of the Lord

Praise to You, O Christ

God of the unexpected and surprising, we follow you with halting steps for fear of what we do not know but we trust that you are with us in all the confusion and anxiety of the present time. We look for love and connection where a pandemic rages and keeps us apart from those we love. We search out hearts for forgiveness when we have been hurt or hurt others by shrill words and division. Heal us Lord, awaken us to the possibilities of a future in your realm and bid us follow you faithfully to bring it about in our time. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

In our Gospel reading for today, we hear words that, though somewhat familiar, aren't the words we want to hear. This is the first Sunday in Advent and our hearts and minds are jumping to another cosmic event in the life of humankind; the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Instead of Gloria in Excelsis Deo, we hear that the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light – but hey, its 2020 – what did we expect? In the year of the pandemic, when we want human contact and worship with singing and Christmas with distant family close by – we enter December as COVID #'s are increasing, worship plans are turning out far different and our Christmas Eve story seems more cataclysmic disaster than cosmic glory.

For a chronic insomniac, the call to stay awake is one I've become accustomed to for years since working many a night shift in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Egleston. Finding oneself awake on nights when you don't have to be is a bit distressing. Not that the occasional sleepless night is worrisome, after all, Jeff and I have two lovely, amazing grown children. When they were babies we were use to waking up for midnight feedings and cries of discomfort and fear. They grew out of those – leaving us in an amnesic lull until they hit puberty and then BAM – the sleepless nights resumed for many different reasons.

Being awake and watchful for “you are not sure what” can lead you to prayer or a severe anxiety attack. Sometimes prayer is fraught with anxiety so God receives a rambling diatribe of complaints and requests for peace and security and a well-timed post card about what the future holds. But we know better, don't we? Stay awake – be alert and watchful – Look, there is Jesus – act busy!

The author of Mark's Gospel calls us to be vigilant; mental, physical and spiritual rigor is expected here, but we are also caught in between that and the fatigue caused by anxiety and fear of the unknown future. This year has felt like a dumpster fire of conflict on many fronts – its too much to face that in place of our beloved liturgical rituals of Advent and Christmas.

This year has caused us to change gears quickly – to move from brick and mortar sanctuaries that smell like candles and still carry the memory of song to virtual sanctuaries that look strangely like our living rooms and smell like the breakfast we just cleaned up so we could jump on Zoom and worship.

In the midst of this disruption that has lasted far longer than any of us expected, the call to wait and watch and work remains. We have a tendency to be able to wait for short periods of time but as time stretches on, our patience and tolerance for vigilance wears thin. We grow tired and cranky and we snap at those we love. Jesus calls us, his disciples, to be prepared, regardless of timing. So we prepare even though we are not sure exactly what we are preparing for and where we are supposed to start.

The Good News in all of this for me is that we have become more nimble, more agile – because we have had to – not to get ahead but to stay afloat! We have reached out to each other virtually or with a phone call or a handwritten note to check on each other. We have gathered our children at home and learned how to navigate new math and time together discovering bugs and birds in our own back yards. We have worshiped in our cars and honked horns for peace. Liturgical Lutherans have broken down and learned

how to receive “take out Communion” with a wafer and a shot glass of grape juice wrapped in cellophane.

We have learned to wait with anticipation for what may be around the corner because we trust in God’s faithfulness. WE depend on Christ’s healing power to help our friends and loved ones recover from this dread disease and we are confident God’s Spirit is leading us into a future that is more transformative and glorious than we can ever imagine.

So we enter Advent to watch for signs around us to love and reach out and be peacemakers to make a difference. We wait for a word that will direct our steps to stand with each other – to reach across whatever aisles separate and divide in order to unite and to work faithfully for the Beloved community to be realized in our midst. We may not know what to expect but we know whose we are and who has promised to be with us forever! Hallelujah and Amen!