

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen. The word of God that we consider today is from Mark's gospel, especially the last part, where Jesus tells this parable: <sup>32</sup> *"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Be on guard, keep awake. 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 servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. <sup>35</sup> Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—<sup>36</sup> lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."*

In this little passage, Jesus uses a particular word. That word is a command and means, "Be alert, be on the watch, be vigilant," or my favorite, the way the ESV translates it, "*stay awake*." Jesus repeats that word three times here, so that should let us know it's something pretty important. It's the very same word he used when he asked his disciples to pray with him in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest – "*remain here and stay awake...stay awake and pray.*"

We hear those words "stay awake" often throughout our lives, don't we? People often tell us to stay awake so that we don't miss out on something exciting. I remember when I was little going to the movies with my Nana and almost every time, there came a point in the movie where I would glance over at her and notice that her head was resting on her chest, so I would shake her and whisper, "Nana, stay awake!" I didn't want her to miss out on important plot points or the climactic defeat of the bad guy.

How many of us have tried to stay awake on New Year's Eve for the countdown and instead found that the couch was becoming more and more comfortable. Then, in the last few seconds, we are roused by one of the little ones, "Stay awake, dad! You're going to miss it!"

We try to stay awake to see the outcome of election results – we want to witness the celebration if our candidate wins. Sometimes we try to stay awake for that nail-biter game in the World Series that goes into extra innings. We know we'll find out who won the next morning, but we want to be there and be awake when it happens! Unless you're a Cubs fan, then you probably haven't found yourself in that situation

One of the more important ones would be when you're driving at night and you start doing the head-bobbing. God sometimes sends you an angel in the passenger seat to snap at you, "Stay awake!" In some circumstances, falling asleep can be deadly! Staying awake ensures that you will arrive safely at your destination.

“Stay awake” Jesus says three times. Stay awake for what? There is something else that he repeats three times in this passage – the idea of an unknown time. “*For you do not know when the time will come*”, “*You do not know when the master of the house will come*” and most emphatically, “*Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven or the Son, but only the Father*”! We are to keep watch and stay awake for Christ’s return. When we have a baptism, remember the words spoken when we hand the parents the candle? “Receive this burning light to show that you have received Christ who is the light of the world, *and be ever watchful for his coming*, that you may meet him with joy.

Isn’t it fascinating that the day and hour were hidden even from Jesus while he was on earth? Even now, Christ in his risen and ascended glory surely *knows* the hour, but it is still the Father who will determine that time. The service of compline in our hymnals is one of the oldest liturgies that we have kept largely unchanged from the early church. It is meant to be the Christian’s last prayers said at the end of the day. In that service, there is a prayer that goes, “Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping, *that awake we may watch with Christ* and asleep we may rest in peace.” In a sense, we are waiting *with* Christ for that day. Watching means praying. It means always being mindful of Christ’s immanent return and it means that our entire lives are lived in light of the end.

Just like falling asleep at the wheel, it can be spiritually deadly for Christians to fall asleep. The world around us carries on without purpose or meaning. The way of the world is to eat, drink, and be merry *now* and put off more important things until tomorrow. Especially during this season, the world has no concept of Advent...or even Christmas for that matter. “I’ll have plenty of time to spend with my family *tomorrow*. I’ve got to be first in line when the store opens on Thanksgiving for the Black Friday sale today! I’ll pay for all these gifts tomorrow and put them on my credit card today. I know I should go to church during this season but I’m simply too busy with all the other things going on! I’ll go on Christmas Eve. I know I should pray but...I’m just so sleepy. I’ll just pray...tomorrow.” *Stay awake!* Advent is not about tomorrow. We may not have tomorrow. Advent is about NOW! Don’t put off the important things. Do them now while there is still time! If we keep operating with this *mañana* attitude, we are not staying awake and being watchful. If we put off being a Christian today, tomorrow may be too late. So *stay awake!*

We can so easily be lulled into the world’s way of doing things. Sometimes we are so “in” the world that we forget we are not “of” the world. It’s like in the movie the Coneheads...the Coneheads are a family of aliens from another planet, stationed on earth to observe human customs. After a few years, they begin to get comfortable on earth. They raise their daughter as a normal human girl. They take up normal earth interests and hobbies – grilling, golf, attending their daughter’s sporting events, and then all of a sudden there is a call from their planet – it’s time to come home! What should have been a joyful announcement catches them off guard and unprepared to leave the world they became so accustomed to. Staying awake means should not become overly attached to the things of this world. As Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, it is all *vanity*, it is fleeting, and it all disappears as quickly as your breath on a cold winter day.

Staying awake means being watchful for those things that Jesus warned his disciples about – false teachers, persecution, and the apparent delay of the Lord’s return.

But we are not inactive as we keep awake. Staying awake is not just avoiding sleep. It is active. Being vigilant and prepared for Christ’s second coming looks like something. In the parable, notice that while the master of the house is away, his servants are each given specific work to do. Living like Advent Christians means we have tasks to do now, while the Master is away, ascended and seated at the right hand of God. We are to use the means of grace wisely, we are to live as children who have a heavenly Father, we are to spread his gospel at every opportunity. It also extends to the minor details of our lives. We are each assigned tasks – some are mothers or fathers, some are children, some are students, some are employers, some are employees. Each of us faithfully goes about his work, mindful that the master of the house may come back at any moment.

But this is not just about doom and gloom. The master’s return is not something to dread because the Lord who is coming again is our savior! Shortly after our Lord gave us this teaching, he would go to Bethany to be anointed – for his death. He would institute the Lord’s Supper – for us and our salvation. He would pray in the garden. He would be arrested, tried, and condemned. He would be crucified for us. And he would be raised from death to vindicate us. As believers, we hear the Advent call to *stay awake* not only as a call to be ready to avoid eternal doom but a call to be ready to enjoy eternal joy!

Burning lights, like those on the Advent wreath are a sign of our keeping awake. We think of the ten virgins with their oil lamps, keeping watch for the bridegroom to arrive. The candles of the Advent wreath were originally just a way of marking the weeks in preparation for Christmas but in recent years the candles have come to represent some of the emphases of the season: Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace. Today, we light the candle of hope. Advent is the season of perpetual hope. That solitary candle burning is a reminder that in the earth’s darkest day, God fulfilled his promise and delivered a Savior to earth, the one who is called the True Light. We live in dark days again but we hold fast to the certain hope that the Light of Lights will come again to complete his work and ransom us from captivity.

Though the time is uncertain, the promise is certain. Christ *will* come again. So, I know yawning is contagious, and I know the world remains sound asleep, but brothers and sisters, I tell you one more time, *stay awake* because Jesus is coming and you won’t want to miss it! AMEN.

May we live in the hope of Christ, who came to save humanity, who comes to us in Word and Sacrament, and who will surely come again. Amen.