

Advent 1 (B)
December 3, 2023
Text: Mark 13:24-37

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When there are too many things on my “to do” list, it becomes hard to pay attention to what is most important—the people in my life. When things become just too busy, when I feel like I have to keep my nose to the grindstone, life takes on a kind of grimness, and it becomes more difficult to feel a sense of joy in life, and everything is tinged with a touch of anxiety. I love the season of Advent because of its call to wakefulness. Keeping awake spiritually isn’t “one more thing to do,” and it’s not driven by fear or anxiety. Instead, it’s an invitation to be alive to the beauty of life with God and the wonder of living in God’s amazing world.

Jesus’ call to keep awake comes from a very dark context. He was preparing his followers to face an uncertain future filled with upheaval, war and confusion. But Jesus invited his followers, then and now, to face the future, not with fear, but with hope, trusting that God is at work for the healing of creation and the renewal of the human family. The day will come when God will set things right with this world, when the visions of the prophets will come true. Weapons of war will be refashioned as tools to serve life, and people will live in peace.

In the meantime, Jesus calls us to keep awake. Spiritual wakefulness isn’t: “Watch out, or else something bad might happen.” Instead, I wonder whether we might think of it in three basic ways: 1) living with a sense of gratitude; 2) keeping our sense of direction, or balance, in life, and 3) being attentive for how God is at work in our life and the lives of the people around us.

Being spiritually awake means living with a sense of gratitude, or reverence, or wonder. In a way, that’s simply what happens when we’re paying attention—but unfortunately, sometimes that can be challenging to do. When we’re worried about our responsibilities, or worried about what someone else thinks about us, or what might happen to people we love (that we have no control over), it’s easy to forget that there’s a whole amazing world around us. But when we are spiritually awake, we pay attention. We really see the people around us. We take notice of how God provides for our needs through the abundance of creation. When we realize that the world around us is more than just window dressing for our own little drama, that everyone and everything around us has a life of their own, how can we not feel a sense of wonder. How can we not be grateful for our part in this amazing life? When we meet the other people in our life and recognize how they also bear the image of God, how can we not feel a sense of awe? And when we see how we share this life with so many other creatures who all

come from God's creative hand, how can we fail to feel a sense of reverence—not only before the moon and stars, or mountains and ocean, but even the little bird chirping outside our window, and the tree it's perched in. In this way, being spiritually awake keeps us connected to feeling joy in life.

Being spiritually awake also means keeping our sense of direction, or balance, or clarity in life. There are so many things that can threaten to misdirect us. Whether it's the barrage of advertisements on TV, or the constant fearmongering in the news, or the unrealistic ideas about what our lives should look like that abound on social media, it's easy to wind up feeling a little lost, or a little off kilter. But when we are spiritually awake, we remember that Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, of humility and generosity, is the only way that leads to a world we really want to live in. Jesus serves as our compass in life, or our north star. Jesus gives us a sense of direction, so that when we make decisions, we're not just flailing about, pushed this way and that by whatever popular culture tells us. Instead, we can feel that we really do know where we're going and how to get there. In this way, being spiritually awake provides a sense of peace.

Finally, being spiritually awake means being attentive for how God is at work in our life and the lives of the people around us. God's work is about overcoming resentments and bringing reconciliation to relationships. God's work is about setting people free from all of the kinds of conditions that are oppressive or dehumanizing. God's work is about nurturing community and making a safe place for all of God's children. And when we are spiritually awake, when we see where God is at work around us, then we can join in, we can add our energy to those life-giving activities. There are all sorts of potential partners who might welcome whatever we have to offer. And every single one of us has been blessed in some way with gifts we can use to benefit God's world. In this way, being spiritually awake leads to having a sense of purpose.

At the end of our reading today, Jesus offers a beautiful image of what it looks like when we are spiritually awake. He pictures a household where the master goes away and leaves the servants in charge to care for the house. Everyone has their own job, even the doorkeeper who watches the door. The work is all shared. And I wonder if that image might suggest that, for us, being spiritually awake is something we do together as a community. We share reflecting on scripture together, and we share the meal of holy communion together. We offer our talents in service to neighbors in need together. We wonder together about how to recognize where God is leading us, and we support each other in the life-long work of following Jesus. We offer a listening ear to each other when the journey is challenging, and we rejoice with each other when there are things to celebrate. Being spiritually awake is less like a solitary watch through the night, and more like a watch party where, with all of God's children, we pay attention to the great

unfolding story of God's love, and we watch with all the love in our heart for God's good and gracious will to be done. Thanks be to God. Amen.