



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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“Stay Awake!

(Mark 13:37)

Rev. David K. Groth

(Jesus said) “And what I say to you I say to all: ‘Stay awake!’” (Mark 13:37)

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

On Fridays, my day off, I usually drive Gail to her work place in Madison, and then spend the day there, running errands, reading, maybe writing a newsletter article. After lunch, I often walk over to the Wisconsin Historical Society. There's a large reading room within that was recently restored. It's just exquisite. Mahogany tables, green glass reading lamps, ornate columns supporting stained glass skylight panels some 50 feet up. They also have these wonderful leather reading chairs with ottomans. They are plush and comfortable. I really don't go there planning to nap . . . but things happen.

Gail has been accusing me of having sleep apnea, an allegation I have vigorously denied. But I'm beginning to wonder now because in that reading room, I think I might have snorted myself awake. When I opened my eyes people were looking. Some seemed concerned, one guy who was chuckling. I decided it was time to pack my things and move along.

Jesus once told his disciples, "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Stay awake.'" Just how are we to do that? How are we to remain alert and watchful? He's talking of his return, of course. "Be on guard, keep awake. It's like a man going on a journey" he says. When he leaves home he puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. 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—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." Four times

in just four verses, he says stay awake. He usually doesn't repeat himself like that, so it must be important. There must be a lot on the line.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that an alarming number of pilots and air-traffic controllers have been falling asleep on the job. It's incredibly dangerous. Lives depend on them staying awake.

Similarly, it is incredibly dangerous for us to fall asleep spiritually, which means to be ignorant or oblivious or unaccepting of the great grace given us through Jesus. Indeed, to fall asleep on *that* job puts at risk our eternal lives.

Reading this text Jesus gives the impression his return would be imminent. "This generation will not pass away" he says, "before these things take place." For some, that's an embarrassment. They think Jesus got it wrong. But let's think about that for a moment.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus was at the temple in Jerusalem. He had just watched the widow give her two little mites, and had commented on her generosity. Then as they walked out of the temple complex one of the disciples is struck again by the beauty of the temple. "Look, Teacher" he says, "what massive stones. What magnificent buildings!" And that temple truly was one of the most impressive man-made structures of the ancient world. We know some of those stones were 37 feet long by 18 feet wide, 12 feet high. (How did they move them from the quarry to the temple mount? How did they pay for them?) The disciples are impressed, maybe even proud of their people's achievement and they want Jesus to be as well. But Jesus disappoints them.

"Do you see this great building?" he asks. "Not one stone here will be left on another. Every one of them will be toppled" (13:2). Jesus is prophesying the destruction of the temple which would happen within that generation's lifetime. In 70 AD, the Romans leveled the city, paying most careful attention to the destruction of the temple. Stones were even pried apart and toppled. Excavations in 1968 uncovered large numbers of these stones left behind where they had fallen centuries before.

So when Jesus says “This generation will not pass away before these things take place”, he’s not speaking of his glorious return. He’s speaking of the destruction of the temple. And he uses that unthinkable event as an image or symbol for the destruction that will take place on the Last Day.

Is his return imminent? I believe it is. All the signs are in place. Besides which our life spans are short. Job says our days pass by swifter than a weaver’s shuttle (7:6). Whether he first comes with trumpet blast and angels, or comes quietly into your hospital room to take you home, either way we need to be ready for that day. We need to be spiritually awake and alert. Yet we have this tendency to live as if that day will never come. It’s a long ways off, we think, and he’s a long ways off.

In China, the game of golf is officially frowned upon as a rich man’s game. In fact, in the mid-1990’s, the central government declared it illegal to develop any new golf courses. But in China such decrees aren’t always taken at face value. The Chinese have a saying, “The mountain is high and the Emperor is far away.” So in the five years following that decree, the number of golf courses in China actually tripled. In fact it became the global hot-spot for golf course development. They just don’t use the g-word. In one area alone, 22 courses were developed in an area the size of Hong Kong Island. They called it the “Yangshan District Land Consolidation and Ecological Project.” Local government officials lend their support because the kickbacks from the developers enriches them (WSJ, 7/7/14).

Sometimes we live like that too, don’t we? We live within the loopholes. We live as if we have all the time in the world. We live as if the “the mountain is high and the Emperor far away.” But here comes Jesus with a surprisingly redundant message: “Stay awake.” Four times in four verses, “Stay Awake.” One way or another, his return is imminent. We don’t know when that day will be so we should live as if it doesn’t matter.

This is not a comfortable text for me because I’m

hardly ready for this day, much less “that day.”

On Monday during the first significant snow storm I made a bunch of shut-in calls and during the small talk, several times I heard the refrain: “I’m just not ready for winter yet.” Ready or not, there’s no stopping winter from coming, is there? It’s the same way with the advent of our Lord. There’s no stopping him; the key is to be ready for him.

Left to ourselves, we would never be able to stay awake. We would never be ready. But we are not left to ourselves. Our gracious Lord is quietly working behind the scenes, has been for millennia now, preparing you and me for the day of his return.

These preparations were first promised in the Garden, when he pledged to crush the serpent’s head. God already had a plan to make things right again. These preparations continued with the flood, the covenant, the exodus, the Passover, the release from Babylonian captivity. All these Old Testament events are part of the preparations God made for you, so you would understand how seriously he takes your sin, but also how seriously he is about forgiving you and having mercy on you and saving you from sin and death.

God continued the preparations by putting just the right couple in place in Bethlehem so that, as promised, Jesus would be born in the city of David and of the house and lineage of David as well. As a man Jesus criss-crosses the land preaching, teaching and healing . . . and in all this, preparing us, so we could know him, trust him, and look to him for salvation.

To prepare for Holy Week, he puts Caiaphis in the Praetorium and Pilate in the governor’s seat, and Herod as Tetrarch of Galilee and Tiberius Caesar as Roman Emperor . . . just the right people, in the right places, to react in predictable ways. The political tensions are high and the crowds are primed to play their part.

Then, when all was ready, when all the dominos were lined up, the Lord gave the first one a little poke, and he marches into Jerusalem on a donkey, with palm branches and

cloaks on the ground and hosannas. It was the way Jerusalem always welcomed her kings. Then he went straight to that magnificent temple and overturned the tables and drove the moneychangers out. At this point, with Caesar Tiberius breathing down their necks to keep the peace, Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas, they feel their hands are tied. And so they tie his hands, because that's the practical thing to do to keep the peace. It's the expedient thing to do, even if unjust. Caiaphas nailed it when he said, "It's better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (Jn. 18:14). All this happened at just the right time, while the people are celebrating the Passover, the occasion when their ancestors were freed from slavery by the blood of a lamb. While they celebrate their Passover, a Roman soldier drives spikes into the limbs of the One whom John the Baptist years before called the Lamb of God. And the blood of that Lamb frees us from slavery to sin and death. Holy Week was the most orchestrated event in history. God was throwing the switch on a plan that was in place from before the foundations of the world (Eph. 1:4). All this, to make sure you are ready for the Last Day.

But that's not the end. Fast forward to Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit gives the gift of language and a holy zeal to the apostles, who scatter and start preaching Christ crucified. The Gospel takes root, and spreads to the nations, including what is now northern Europe where many of your ancestors came from. Fast forward to the dark ages, where the clergy and scholars have all but buried the Gospel in muck and mire, but somehow, God sustains the true faith through the laity, and light continues to shine in the darkness. Fast forward again to the 1840's and 50's when he prompted many of your relatives to pay a handsome fee to get on creaking, leaking ships and make the perilous journey over the Atlantic. I hope you know many of them were doing that for you, not for themselves. They were starting over, and it usually takes two or three generations to recover from that. And I hope you know many of them made that trip so you could worship him in freedom and in truth, rather

than being consigned to some watered down, tedious, state religion.

Fast forward again, to that day when God used your parents to bring you to a baptismal font. You were probably a baby, maybe sleeping contentedly physically and spiritually, but with a cold splash of water he awakened you.

Fast forward to this day. Who knows? Maybe he's even using this passage, this four-fold redundancy to shake you awake and this Supper to prepare you for his return.

If left to ourselves, we wouldn't stand a chance. We'd fall asleep in a heartbeat. It's not that we would intend to sleep, but things happen. Listen again to the assurance he gives us in the Epistle lesson. "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart . . . because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." It surprises us for what it doesn't say. There's no word about being always obedient and diligent, no word about us being worthy. Apparently salvation doesn't depend on us. It depends on the strength, grace and love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Trust in him with your heart and confess him with your lips. Don't look inward. You won't find anything worth clinging to there. Trust in him. He has made all the necessary preparations, and with his Word and sacraments, "*He will keep you strong [awake, and alert] to the end*" (1 Cor. 1:3-9). Amen.

