

ADVENT I

“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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. “
Mark 13: 32

Our Gospel from Mark comes from a complex chapter called “the little apocalypse.” Its message, in brief: watch out, *bad things are going to happen. Be watchful, be careful, because cataclysms will be upon us at some unknown moment. Be prepared.*

Is that how we feel? Is that where we are now, today, at St John’s, I wonder? On the one hand, we are certainly, in this country and around the globe, in the midst of – or maybe only at the beginning of – hard and scary times economically. We have been watching a downward spiral, a confluence of malign forces, unique to our lifetimes. On many levels bad things are indeed happening, and we have yet to understand or to feel their true impact. We can’t help being affected by all this, and at times it does feel apocalyptic, cataclysmic, perhaps catastrophic.

On the other hand, we have the promise of a new administration, the possibility of an end to some truly bad times in the governance of our country: times of greed, recklessness, and moral stupidity at best, evil at worst. We have the hope of the beginning of redemption of our country’s international reputation and our national dream of justice and equality for all.

So as we begin this Advent Season, and as we begin a new church year together as a worshipping community, where are we? How do we feel? How do we see ourselves?

Sometimes I look back over what I preached three years ago on a certain liturgical day. Three years, because our lectionary runs in three- year cycles, so I will be looking at the same lectionary readings. I look back not because I’ve ever used an old sermon again –they always seem very dated , but to see what I was thinking and saying to the congregation then. Here’s part of what I wrote three years ago on Advent I.

This fall has been the most painful and difficult one for me in my memory .The departure of Greg, our music director, after many years of service, has been wrenching for our community, stirring up strong feelings of sorrow, anger, and loss, and creating a great deal of unanticipated

extra work: administrative, planning, and pastoral work. The challenge of moving forward our capital campaign and our stewardship drive has been immense. The struggle to secure equal marriage continues, the struggle to retain women's reproductive health and freedom seems perilous, the scandals of our administration in Washington and the scandal of the war in Iraq implicate and depress us all, I believe. A dark time indeed.

Well, reading this over the other day, I felt extremely joyous, because – look at where we are now! We have a wonderful, generous minister of music who participates fully and creatively in so much of our parish life, who has expanded our repertoire of congregational music enormously, and works with a small but happy choir. We have completed the phase of our capital campaign that's allowed us to renovate our basement and welcome Pine Village School as an ideal tenant. We have secured marriage equality in the Commonwealth, and we can look forward to some new Supreme Court justices who will, I am confident, protect women's reproductive health and freedom. While the challenges of our international commitments and conflicts will remain, I believe we share a hope that our presence abroad will soon be guided by more wisdom and humility than in recent years.

So as a parish, as a community of faith, we have traveled quite a distance. That time three years ago was the most painful and difficult of my entire ministry here, and not just for me, for all of us who were here, I believe. And now, despite the economic difficulties we face as a society, now feels perhaps like the best time. Not only do we seem cohesive and harmonious on the whole, as a community, but we see our values and hopes reflected in the recent election and the promise of new national leadership I feel almost superstitious saying so, but I believe it's the truth.

So here we are in Advent, a beginning that is actually a kind of between- times. Advent is the culmination of the long weeks after Pentecost, where for half the church year we have been celebrating the work of the Spirit in our lives and the life of the world. And we have been reminding ourselves of our own responsibility to follow the teachings of Jesus and do the work of ushering in the reign of God. But now, in this time of silence, darkness, and waiting, we are reminded that the world has yet to be redeemed. The prayer of Advent is that Christ will *soon come again* to rule over God's creation with justice and love for all.

But as I said last week, Advent also takes us back to the beginning of things, asks us to re-call those times long ago when men and women of faith yearned for the first coming of the Savior. The season aims to capture that spirit of hope in the midst of hopelessness, a spirit of that which would be too good to be true: some new and unique

manifestation of God's promise to save a world gone wrong: the birth of a child in a manger, a child who will change the course of human history.

And we are at a between -times here in the parish as well. I have said repeatedly – and my sermon-memory bank from 2005 underscores this– that we have completed two big projects, two chapters in our communal history: our basement renovation and the securing of marriage equality. What is next for us as a parish? What does God have in store for us?

When we talked with Frank Fornaro about this last month, he counseled us that we need to take a Sabbath Year, a Sabbatical Year, in which we refrain from undertaking big project or making major decisions. A year in which we rest in gratitude and thanksgiving for the accomplishments we have realized. A year in which to engage in prayer and discernment about what indeed God may hope for us next. A year in which to explore more fully and deeply who we are as a worshipping community, a *people of faith*.

I'm always intrigued by that question: who are we as a people, together? What is our identity as we gather each Sunday in worship, and what is our collective meaning as we part each Sunday to go about our lives in the world beyond these doors? We are more than a group of individuals coming together for an hour or two. But what is that more?

Looking back at the mood three years ago – not my mood alone but our mood, was instructive. Because I could see so clearly that, like an individual, our community has moods and phases and changes. Three years ago we were somewhat divided, sore, uncertain about our commitments to one another and our capacity to survive and grow. Today, I believe, we are stronger, more committed, and more hopeful than we have ever been.

So that's a bit about our identity today, as I see it. But how did we get through that dark time and go from strength to strength? What about our life together made that possible? And what does that suggest to us about the future?

I would be remiss, and unprofessional, if I did not say that of course we got through with the help of the Holy Spirit. But in my experience the Holy Spirit is partial to helping those who also help themselves. The Holy Spirit helps those who, as Jesus admonishes in today's Gospel, those who *stay awake*, alert for opportunities, alive to the Spirit's very moving in our midst.

And so my prayer for us this Advent, and for the Sabbath Year in to which we enter, is that we will indeed *keep awake* together, in community, in hope, in discernment, and in collective prayer, as we explore God's glorious purpose for us all

Amen.