

December 3, 2023
1st Sunday of Advent
Mark 13:33-37

Jesus said to the disciples: Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.

Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: "Watch!"

Background:

With the first Sunday of Advent, a new liturgical year begins. During this year, most of the Gospels will come from the Gospel of Mark. Because Mark is the shortest of all the Gospels, some texts will also come from the Gospel of John. The Gospel texts in Advent reflect a longing for the presence of God and invite each person to be in touch with their own longing for God.

In the time of Jesus, people lived primarily in the present. Even Jesus exhorted his followers not to “worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” (Matthew 6:34) Their instruments for measuring time were less sophisticated and less accurate. Today’s Gospel refers to the different watches of the night as the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. Daily life and survival demanded that people pay attention to the tasks at hand. Suggesting that people look toward the future—even the near future—required a significant shift in thinking. Mark’s emphasis on the need to be vigilant for the time when the Master will return would have been difficult, especially if the time of waiting becomes long.

The word “servant” in the text would probably be more accurately translated “slave.” While slaves were a common part of the social fabric of Jesus’ time, they did not endure the type of abusive slavery that many assume. Slaves in this culture were considered integral members of the household. Also unusual for us is the fact that women and children could be sold into slavery in order to pay off a family debt. Slaves who were part of a Christian house were cautioned against taking advantage of that fact that they were “brothers” or “sisters” of their masters. The Jews with whom Jesus lived would have also understood themselves as being slaves of God. Because God had freed them from their slavery to the Egyptians, God had become their new Master.

The hours that are mentioned in the parable--evening, midnight, cockcrow, and morning--were the hours of watch for the Roman soldiers. Palestinians would have used first, second, and third watch. These watches were the times when it was dark and people were most vulnerable to attack from an enemy. Jesus is exhorting his disciples to be like soldiers, standing guard against any attempt from an evil enemy who might try to take advantage of the vulnerability of those who are asleep. By remaining vigilant, the disciple remains strong to protect the relationship with the Master.

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you feel about the cold, shorter days, and the winter that is coming upon the northern half of the earth, as the days grow shorter?
2. How does the cycle of nature speak to you of God working in nature and in your own life?
3. What is your experience of needing to wait and be vigilant? Are you good at waiting? What do you do with yourself during periods of waiting?
4. During periods of absence and waiting, what are the different voices you hear within yourself?
5. Do you know people who are so busy with the tasks of the day that they do not have time or energy to think about the future?

6. If you imagine that God as the master is addressing us as his servants and placing us in charge of his house, what area of his house has God entrusted to you?
7. How can this season of Advent be a season of blessing to you?
8. In what way do you need to hear Jesus' exhortation to be watchful, alert, and awake at this point in your life journey?
9. Can you talk to God honestly and frankly about how you are hearing this Gospel and entering the season of Advent? What gifts for yourself would you like ask of God during this season? What gifts would you like to ask for others?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to fr.paul.gallagher.ofm@gmail.com.

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fsccl-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for December 3, 2023, the First Sunday of Advent

You, Lord, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever.
Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?
Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage.
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for, such as they had not heard of from of old.
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him.
Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways!
Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds
are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you;
for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.
O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Rouse your power, and come to save us. Once again, O Lord of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see; take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand has planted the son of man whom you yourself made strong.
May your help be with the son of man whom you yourself made strong.
Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

Brothers and sisters: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus said to his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

Excerpts from Isaiah 63:16-19; 64:2-7; Psalm 80:2-3, 15-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; and Mark 13:33-37

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for December 3rd, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. This is the first Sunday of Advent, and the beginning of a new liturgical year; it is year B in the three-year cycle, where the gospels are primarily from Mark. In this Sunday's gospel from Mark, Jesus tells his disciples repeatedly to be watchful and ready, anticipating his return. He tells them, "Be watchful! You do not know when the time will come. You do not know when the lord of the house is coming. Watch!"

The other readings also refer to waiting for the Lord, and his saving power. In the first reading from Isaiah, it says, "Return for the sake of your servants. Oh, that you would come down, would that you might meet us doing right, mindful of you in our ways! No eye has ever seen any God but you doing such awesome deeds for those who wait for him." Psalm 80 exclaims, "Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved. O shepherd of Israel, rouse your power, and come to save us." In the second reading, from the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "God bestowed grace on you in Christ Jesus, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

God provides for his people, from the Old Testament through the New. Through the awesome deeds of old remembered in Isaiah and the work of his hands; through the care and protection and strength and the son of man in Psalm 80; through the grace bestowed in 1 Corinthians; and at his coming for those who wait vigilantly in Mark, God provides.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!