

December 3, 2017

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 liturgical year, most of the gospels will be drawn from the Gospel of Mark. Because Mark is the shortest of the gospels, some texts will also come from the Gospel of John. Drawing on John's Gospel during this liturgical year helps the church have a fuller appreciation of John's Gospel, which is generally only used during Lent and Eastertide. This year, only the first two Sundays of Advent will have gospels from Mark's Gospel.

The gospel texts for Advent reflect a longing for the presence of God, and they invite each person to be in touch with their own longing for God's presence. In the time of Jesus, people lived primarily in the present. Jesus exhorted his followers not to "worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have worries of its own, Today's troubles are enough for today." (Matthew 6:34) Their instruments for measuring time were less sophisticated and less accurate. 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 strange for Jesus and for the people of the day.

The word "servant" in the text would probably be more accurately translated as "slave." While slaves were a common part of the social fabric of Jesus' time, they did not endure the type of slavery that many assume when they hear the word. Slaves in this culture were considered integral members of the household. Also, 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. They 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. Who greets you when you return from a long absence? How would you characterize your experience?
2. When in your life have you been most watchful?
3. What is your experience of being entrusted with responsibility in the absence of another? Does that responsibility feel different for you than your own responsibilities?
4. 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?
5. How would the Season of Advent be different if the Church focus moved from us, who are waiting for Jesus' return, to God, who is waiting for the fullness of God to be present in our lives?

6. What happens within you as the Church enters the season of Advent this year? How is it the same as previous years, and how is it different?
7. Jesus exhorts his followers to be watchful, alert, and awake. What are the different ways this exhortation might be meant?
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 about the place in your own life where you need to hear the words of Jesus in today's gospel, about your efforts to be watchful, or about some other aspect of your life that you need to bring to God?

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 annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. The homepage is <https://fsc-calledtobe.org/>. The third 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, 2017, 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