Gospel Background and Reflection for November 29, 2026
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's 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, "Do not 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. This Gospel refers to the different watches of the night, as they called them: 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 relate to that term. 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 called them the 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 colder, shorter days, and the winter that is coming upon the northern half of the earth as the days grow shorter? How do the cycles of nature speak to you of God working in nature and in your own life?
2. What is your experience of needing to wait and be vigilant? Are you good at waiting?
3. What do you do with yourself during periods of absence and waiting? What are the different voices you hear within yourself at these times?

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. 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?
6. How can this season of Advent be a season of blessing to you?
7. In what way do you need to hear Jesus' exhortation to be watchful, alert, and awake at this point in your life journey?
8. Can you talk with God honestly and frankly about how you are hearing this Gospel and entering the season of Advent? What gifts for yourself would you like to ask of God during this season? What gifts would you like to ask of God for others?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are prepared and distributed by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel, as edited from Reflections authored by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for November 29, 2026, 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