

December 3, 2023 First Sunday of Advent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Mark 13:24-37

"Alert to What?"

Douglas T. King

"During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night bread reminded them, 'Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow...' (Linn, p. 1) This story is from the book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* which Anne Peacock so graciously shared with me. We will return to this story later in the sermon.

Advent always brings us a stark juxtaposition. We envision the warm and cuddly images of Christmases past, gathered around a glowing Christmas tree with a mug of hot chocolate. And then we come to church and the lectionary brings us an apocalyptic vision of the future; of all the heavens in turmoil and everything we have known passing away.

It would be fair to ask, what gives? We are reminded, once again, that advent is more than just a countdown to Christmas. It is a time when we are in preparation for a new age; for the inbreaking of the reign of God. We are waiting for a cooling

baby in a manger, as the season tries to ready us for God showing up larger than life. Advent is a season that is not solely looking back in nostalgia to a babe born in a manger and Christmas' past. It is also a call to be intently present to the future unfolding before us. We are called to be ever watchful for all of the ways the divine is arriving in our world, both big and small. Advent is a season in which we prepare to receive God into our midst.

Our text from the gospel of Mark this morning borrows from a variety of Old Testament sources to paint an apocalyptic landscape for us, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." And all of this is just a prelude to the Son of Man arriving with great power and glory.

We are urgently called to "beware," "keep alert," "Keep awake." We are told all of this drama could unfold at any moment so we must be ever hyper vigilant. So why did I open this sermon with a story about orphans in refugee camps receiving help so that they could indeed sleep?

As we enter into this season of advent I believe it is imperative for us to broaden and deepen our understanding of what it means for us to "beware...keep alert...keep awake." On the surface level this text suggests we are being called to an anxious presence. I am not sure we need any help with that these days. In our tumultuous and unpredictable world we have no trouble flinching at the arrival of each fresh news alert on our phones. I would argue that since the attacks on 9/11 on through the pandemic, the next super storm, yet another school shooting, war and strife throughout the world and whatever

awaits us next, served to us in a 24 hour news cycle that shows up in our hands all day long, we have no trouble being alert and on edge.

The key to this season of advent is to what we are alert. Where are we placing our focus and concentration? What reality are we allowing ourselves to see? At first those orphans during World War Two were only awake to their trauma. They had been rescued and were being cared for but all they could envision was the suffering and deprivation they had previously experienced. Their reality was shaped by what had happened to them in the past. The bread they received to hold in their hands allowed them to see the reality that they were safe and being cared for. It brought them comfort and confidence in a challenging time. It awakened them to their new reality.

The question for us is what brings us comfort and confidence in our days today? Where should our focus be? How should we see the world? To what should we be awake? I am going to propose that our journey to find appropriate focus can be found back in the sixteenth century with Ignatius of Loyola. He helped fashion the daily examen, a framework by which we can pray every day and be awake to the arrival of God in our midst.

There are many versions of this prayer but this one can be particularly helpful. It has five steps and the rule in sermons is never give people more than three things to remember so we have printed them on the back of the bulletin this morning. The first phase of the prayer is to recognize God's presence and offer gratitude. We start by thanking God for all of our blessings. The second phase of the prayer is praying to receive God's grace that we may grow beyond today's failures and live in tune with God's will. The third phase is reviewing the events

and thoughts of our day. The fourth phase is considering how the different actions and thoughts of our day brought us closer or further away from God. The fifth phase is looking toward tomorrow and how we can engage in that day in a way that draws us toward the divine.

If you want to give this a try in this advent season, clip the little box out of your bulletin, and place it on your bedside table or tape it to your bathroom mirror. Finish your day by examining God's presence throughout your day and how you might seek out God's presence tomorrow. Or start your day in a similar fashion. There are a multitude of ways that we can seek to be alert to God's presence arriving in our midst. The one thing that is clear, we are called to do this, to be alert to how God's presence is revealing itself in our lives.

And when we are alert to God's presence in our midst we are led beyond the detrimental things that occupy too much of our headspace, all of those fears and anxieties that run through our minds on a loop.

The Episcopal bishop, Steven Charleston describes the journey in this fashion, "Letting go. Let go of the worries that tangle your mind. Let go of the fear of the future you cannot clearly see. Let go of the memories that melt beneath your feet like quicksand, drawing you deeper into the dark waters of regret. Let go of every care that would steal your heart. Drop them all from your hands. Let them fall from your hands. Let them fall to the ground. They can hold you no longer...By your faith you are free, alive in the liberty of hope... Let go now and be healed...Faith is a conscious decision. To embrace it we have to let go of our fear...We listen to a different voice...It is the Spirit...(Charleston, pp. 42-43)

When we are intentionally alert to God's presence in our lives we are offered a window by which we can see the myriad of ways God has sustained us and will sustain us for all that is to come. We are given the same gift those children during World War II received, the bread of life to hold in our hands. They were reminded, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow." Today God sustained us and tomorrow God will sustain us once more.

In this season of advent let us be awake to God's presence arriving in our midst. Hold on to what gives you life.

Let us come to the table and be fed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Charleston, Steven, *Ladder to the Light*, Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, 2021.

Linn, Dennis, Sheila and Matthew, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1995.

The Daily Examen
of Saint Ignatius of Loyola

- 1.) Recognize God's presence and offer gratitude.
- 2.) Pray for God's grace to lead us beyond our failures.
- 3.) Review the events and thoughts of your day.
- 4.) Consider how your actions and thoughts led you closer to or further away from God
- 5.) Look to tomorrow and how the day can be engaged to bring you closer to God.