

**- Saint John's Pulpit (Nov. 27, First Sunday of Advent) -
"Advent: Time to Keep Awake" Matthew 24:36-44**

³⁶ "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

How did they get a good night's sleep?

Finally, we begin this year's Advent journey together. Time to wait for our Messiah, Jesus Christ. Time to see peace brought up by Jesus. We all need Jesus and His peace all over the world this year seriously! There are so many people who long for the coming of the Messiah. People who are praying for peace in Ukraine, safe campus life without shooting, a stable job environment without last-minute layoff notice, warm winter without worrying about utilities, a unified country without division, a mature denomination and its Christians overcoming barriers and borders. Indeed, all these things make us keep watch without sleeping sometimes or many days.

As I was preparing for this season of Advent, I had a chance to meditate on all stories about the birth of Jesus Christ. Surprisingly, all the main figures in the story of Jesus' birth were far from peace, stability, warmth, and safety! When Jesus was born, he had to escape from all threats from King Herod who wanted to kill him. Jesus was not born in a fancy delivery room! No evidence of whether he got a pink-colored footprint by nurses. No baby beanie! Warmth was not His middle name. His birthplace was a manger (possibly made of stone or wood).

In addition to this, all other main characters developing Jesus' nativity could not get a good sleep seriously! I am not sure how they could manage their daily lives without a good quality of sleep! What about the magi? The Bible says that they found a mysteriously bright star in the sky! Then, they began to take a trip following the star. To see the star, their main road trip had to be done at nighttime. After finding the unknown star, they spent lots of days and nights researching and interpreting what the star meant. At the same time, they would have questioned whether they were in the right direction although they were following it.

Who got the Good News of Jesus' birth? We know that they were shepherds. They were keeping watch of their sheep that night. Of course, they were very tired and sleepy. But the beautiful chant by the heavenly angel choirs made them awake and rejoice. They couldn't do this without their daily and faithful night work!

What about Mary? Upon pregnancy, women begin to experience lots of changes in their bodies. I know it when Hannah was pregnant. Emotionally up and down. Her morning sickness was so bad. I couldn't enjoy my favorite breakfast freely for a while because it was not her type. Unbearable news came to her from the angel Gabriel. With that news, she had to think about it day and night. After her delivery, she might spend lots of nights keeping awake. Rushing to Egypt out of Herod's threats here and there.

Joseph also would have struggled with his sleeping. Dreaming about his upcoming honeymoon turned out a nightmare hearing his fiancé Mary's pregnancy. He was told that the baby was by the Holy Spirit, period! Joseph may have a prescription for Prozac. He would have spent many nights thinking of the best way to break up with Mary. One big thing was this.

Whenever he met the angel, it was done in a dream! We know that a night with many dreams always makes people easily tired.

Your choice?

As we noted, all characters in Jesus' nativity are kept awake. We know that keeping awake is one of the important teachings in the first Christian community especially on Jesus' Returning to this world. But 'keeping awake' in this context does not mean your night without sleeping literally. What about people who are playing computer games all night? Can we say that they are keeping awake?

The story today presents a theme of keeping awake. Matthew 24 and 25 present many stories encouraging us to keep vigilant preparing for 'eschaton' and 'final judgment'. As both eschaton and final judgment are from God, there is nothing we can do indeed. However, there is one thing we can do regarding this. It is to keep awake. Be away from spiritual dormancy! This Advent season is a good time to train our vigilance and awakening. The good news of the birth of the Messiah was not delivered to all people at the same time. This means all characters in the Bible never intended to become the main figures to receive the Good News. When all were humble (which means surrendering their will, thoughts, and plans) and did their best to serve their roles faithfully, the Good News came to them. When they treasured the Good News carefully, they became a part of God's Salvation. Of course, many non-believers may plan this Christmas to stay all night to entertain themselves by eating, drinking, and dancing. But we the people of God need to choose a different way.

42 Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Matthew 24:42-44 NRSV

Recently, in the November Council meeting, all council leaders saved quite a long time discussing one item. Finding out organizations to support with Christmas Eve offering this year! As you recall, every year, St. John's

Christmas Eve Offering has been used to support not only the church general fund but also a couple of neighboring relief organizations. After serious discussion, the council decided to support two organizations – Capital Area Food Bank, and Rising Hope Ministry. And 30% of the offering will be given to each.

Hunger always makes people keep awake. To these people, I pray that St. John's Christmas Eve Offering will make them feel warmth and fullness even for just one day. Yes, when we try to keep awake seeking those who need our help, others will keep awake feeling the love of Christ. In that sense, we have many things to do this Advent and Christmas season. Don't you think that this Christmas is like the first Christmas when Jesus was born? Some people are under threat cause of war. Others had to leave their houses because of flooding, wildfire, and other disasters. Many crying people we see this year for the loss of their loving ones. Many refugees like Jesus' family want to save themselves. Many soldiers will miss their families in a field like shepherds. Like King Herod, there is a leader who forces people to die. Yes, many people may keep awake because of the heavy weight of life these days. This is the reason why we need to keep awake to pray and support them.

For all those who keep awake, Advent is a season of Light. All about the world tells us that we are in darkness. But a bright star is given to all. We can stop this darkness, but we can see and follow the star in the sky. For all churches in the United Methodist Church are struggling to find the way to go, Jesus the Messiah, the brightest star is given to them. Their only choice is to see it and follow it faithfully. We also do the same. Then, the brightest star will brighten their journey.

Let's put aside all non-essential stuff now. We just begin this year's Advent. Let us keep awake to find out Jesus and what to do for our neighbors. Let's be more obedient and faithful to fulfill the love of Christ.