

Advent 1 / November 28, 2021

Luke 21:36

“But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Do you find it easy to stay awake, or do you struggle to keep your eyes open during the day? Do you toss and turn all night, or do you fall asleep as soon as your head hits the pillow? It seems the older we get the drowsier we feel. In Psalm 127 it says, “He gives to His beloved sleep.” I guess the Lord loves us more the older we get. But, try telling that to your boss if she or he catches you asleep on the job. They are likely to speak in the spirit of our gospel and say, “Stay awake at all times!” Perhaps not word for word, or as kind and forgiving as Jesus, but doubtless with the same sense of urgency. It’s not good to be caught asleep on the job. It could cost you your job. It would be far worse to be caught asleep at the return of Christ; the fulfillment of the age and the beginning of the new!

The gospel lessons for the last Sundays of the church year and the first Sunday of Advent, remind us of Jesus’ promise to return. They speak of signs in the heavens and on earth which testify to the certainty of His words. In our gospel this morning Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Rather than a simple gentle reminder, Jesus seeks to impress upon us the absolute importance of being awake in our faith, so that day doesn’t close in on us like a trap.

The signs preceding that day are many, varied and frightening. But the signs are not meant to frighten, they are meant to keep us awake, alert and give us hope. Something indescribably good is going to happen! We wouldn’t want to miss it for the world! Literally! Jesus didn’t say to cower in fear. He said, “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” We wouldn’t want to sleep through our redemption from sin, Satan and death. We stay awake and keep alert, because we wouldn’t want to miss the most glorious homecoming, as God again makes His dwelling with humans as in the beginning.

Stay awake and stay alert are the watchwords for the end for the church year and the beginning of Advent. Do you count the days leading up to Christmas? Have you ever been given an Advent Calendar? My favourites are the ones with a chocolate for each day. But they require discipline. One chocolate for each day, no peeking and eating ahead. If you like chocolate you couldn’t imagine forgetting your daily advent treat. You would never miss a day, because you would be so looking forward to each day’s chocolate and especially to the chocolate for Christmas Day, because that’s the best of all. Those treats are meant to remind us of the treasure of Christ, whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day and whose return, we look forward to on the last day. They remind us both to treasure the days leading to Christmas, and also to treasure each day of life in Christ. Most importantly, they remind us to remember and look forward to the return of Christ, because that will be the best day of all!

But you know how it is, we get burdened by the cares of daily living and sidetracked by the passing pleasures and fancies of life. Jesus said, “Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation (which means apathy, laziness, spiritual sluggishness and sloth of the soul) and drunkenness and the cares of this life and that day come upon you like a trap.” If you somehow forget about your chocolate advent calendar you can always make up for lost time and eat the chocolate for the days you missed, even if Advent is long past. I found one in a closet that was a couple of years old. The chocolate was a little discoloured but still edible. At least it didn’t make the kids sick. Strange as it sounds, it’s easier to set aside our watchfulness for the day of Christ’s return than it is to forget about a chocolate advent calendar. We can always make up lost time on a chocolate advent calendar, but we won’t be able to make up for lost time, if we set aside the day of Christ in our hearts and are not awake in faith when He returns, or when He calls us to Himself in death. In love, Jesus urges us to stay awake in faith and stay alert for His return or our departure, so we may stand in His presence in peace.

Jesus says, “But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man.” The escape to which He refers is not from the troubling things that will precede His return. Those things come upon believers and unbelievers. He wants us to escape from their destructive effects on our faith and stand before Him at His return. We must all go through many troubles before we enter fully into the kingdom of heaven. We must not let the way we respond to these troubles hinder our faith and prevent us from entering the kingdom of heaven.

How do you deal with stress in your life? There are helpful ways of dealing with stress and harmful ways. Some people deal with stress by means of things that would fall under the category of “dissipation and drunkenness.” Some people give into despair and give up their faith, because of the cares and troubles of this life. We pray not that we may escape the things that are going to take place. We pray that we may deal with them in such a way that we draw closer to Christ and are drawn closer to the heart of God in Christ, so we may be preserved in our faith until its fulfillment in life everlasting.

We escape the negative effect of the things that are coming upon the earth, by remembering that suffering is part of life and that Jesus joined us in the suffering of this life, so that in Him we would receive strength to endure and have hope for the future. We remember that there is suffering because of our faith in Christ. Even as Jesus took up the suffering of His cross, we too must take up our cross and follow Him. We escape the negative effect of these things and stand in the presence of Christ at His return, by standing firm in His word. Jesus withstood the temptations of the devil in the wilderness, by the power and promise of God’s word. He rebuffed every temptation with God’s word. In our text He said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” We withstand the temptations of the devil, the world and our sinful nature in the power and promise of Jesus’ words.

We escape the things that are coming on the earth and prepare to stand in the presence of Jesus, by standing together in the word; gathering for prayer, worship and fellowship. There is power in the word and strength in numbers. We are encouraged in our spirits and strengthened by the Holy Spirit when we gather together for worship, prayer and fellowship. We don’t do these things for ourselves alone. We do them for the blessing and benefit of one another and the whole body of Christ on earth. That’s why we remember to pray each week and daily for the church throughout the earth. The author of Hebrews wrote, “And let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together...but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing closer.” We look forward to that day with greater anticipation than children working through their chocolate Advent Calendar.

As we begin to count the days to Christmas, we remember that the true countdown is to the day of Jesus’ return. We look forward to it as the day of our liberation from the prison of sin and the condemnation of death. We watch, not by scanning the heavens, but by abiding in the word and looking to Christ for forgiveness, encouragement and strength. He who has called us is faithful and will bring our faith to fulfillment on the day of Christ in our share of His resurrection to eternal life. God keep us to that day. In Jesus’ Name. Amen