

## **Staying Awake**

**First in a Series of Four Sermons, “Getting Christmas Right”**

**November 26 - 27, 2022 / First Sunday in Advent**

**Matthew 21 - And be watchful in every season, praying in order that you have the strength to flee all those things that are about to happen and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man.**

**Matthew 24 - Therefore stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.**

Dear Friends in Christ,

These next four Sundays, we will be focused on getting our Christmas preparations and celebrations just right. We'll be looking for the perfect balance between Santa Claus and Jesus. Next Sunday, our sermon theme is “Repenting Sincerely.” Two Sundays from now - “Rejoicing Always.” And the Sunday right before Christmas - Magnifying Jesus.

Today - Staying awake. There are at least two ways we might travel through this Advent and Christmas season. The first is to just sort of lollygag our way through and adopt the Doris Day approach that whatever will be will be. And the second is to follow Jesus Christ so closely that, as Paul says it to the Thessalonians, ***“the Lord makes us increase and abound in love for one another and for all.”***

The first approach is just to sort of survive the season, and the second is to enjoy it in such a way that others are attracted to Christ and His Church.

Three lessons we want to learn this morning about what it means to enjoy the season in such a way that others are attracted to Christ and His Church. Lesson #1 is that it requires ***good posture***. Lesson #2 is that it involves having ***correct expectations***. Lesson #3 is that it means having a ***sense of urgency*** about that which matters. ***Good posture, correct expectations, a sense of urgency.***

### ***•Good Posture***

**Psalm 123:2 - Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God**

Getting Christmas right begins with an upward look to God. A failure to do so will make it hard to respond attentively to the Master's commands. In his book, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction," Eugene Peterson says it this way, "*Too often we think of religion as a far-off, mysteriously run bureaucracy to which we apply for assistance when we feel the need. We go to a local branch office and direct the clerk (sometimes called the pastor) to fill out our order for God. Then we go home and wait for God to be delivered to us according to the specifications that we have set down.*"

Rather, we would take the posture of a servant, looking to the Master for marching orders. The posture of a student, listening carefully to the Teacher for important life lessons. The posture of an athlete huddled up with her Coach explaining the role of each player in the next few minutes of play.

Luke records Jesus warning His first century disciples, **But when these things begin to happen, straighten up and lift your heads, because your redemption draws near.**

I have a vivid memory of my two sisters getting ready for their high school prom. Mom would have them dress up in their full prom regalia, put a book on their heads, and practice walking in high heels around the house. I know other parents who have given close attention to this matter of teaching their children good manners, which includes looking people in the eyes, standing up straight, active listening skills, etc.

Throughout my years of teaching Confirmation Classes, one of my many pet peeves was seeing students slouching in their chairs and giving the appearance that they weren't interested in what was being presented. And so my frequent spiel went like this, "Thank you for sitting up straight, looking me in the eyes, and listening carefully. I insisted that my students either listen to me, or at least look like they were listening.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who will be hearing two distinct messages aimed at helping them get Christmas right this year. The world will be focused on only so many shopping days left, but the Church will be focused on wars and rumors of wars signaling the nearness of the Son of Man returning in a cloud with power and great glory. The world will urge you to be making a list and checking it twice, but the Spirit of God would be urging you stay awake, spiritually speaking - that is to remember what to remember what you have learned about the teachings, the miracles, the death and

the resurrection of Jesus as a way of staying prepared for what is to come. Sinners who are living according to the flesh will be frightened by the notion that the heavens and the earth will be passing away, but the precious and redeemed people of God who are listening well will be strengthened in their faith by tidings of comfort and joy.

### ***•Correct Expectations***

**Psalm 123 v 2-3 - so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt**

Getting Christmas right has to do with having the right expectations. If your Christmas happiness depends on decorations being just right or on family meals going smoothly or on gift exchanges being perfect or on having enough money to do everything you want to be doing, then your expectations may or may not be met.

On the other hand, if your Christmas joy depends on God being merciful as often as you cry out for mercy, all will be well with your soul. Peterson writes, *“The basic conviction of a Christian is that God intends good for us and that He will get His way in us. We do not see God as a police officer on patrol, watching over the universe, ready to club us or put us in jail if we get out of hand. We see Him as a potter working with the clay of our lives, forming and reforming until, finally, he has shaped a redeemed life, a vessel fit for the kingdom.”*

Christmas is at its core a celebration of God not just staying up in the heavens watching over us at a distance. It is God stooping down, coming down and entering into our condition. It is God never sleeping, never slumbering, always watching over us, always keeping His promises, forgiving all of our sins, redeeming every one of our souls, meeting every one of our correct expectations, with no exceptions.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who live their days expecting that every time they cry out for God to have mercy, mercy will be granted. Expecting that every time they hold to the teachings of Christ, their hearts will not be fainting nor will their Christmas be ruined. Expecting that as often as they eat and drink at their Lord’s table with repentant hearts, the chaos of the world around them will not be able to diminish the peace of God that is within them. Expecting that as often as they stay awake to the guidance of God’s Spirit,

their hearts will not be weighed down with anxiety, nor will this season of the church year be squandered.

## *Sense of Urgency*

Jesus would look us in the eyes today, and speak clearly, **Therefore stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming....you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.**

The first key to getting Christmas right is good posture. The second is correct expectations. The third is a sense of urgency. Eugene Peterson had this to say about society, 40 years ago. *“Freedom is on everyone’s lips. Freedom is announced and celebrated. But not many feel or act free. Evidence? We live in a nation of complainers and a society of addicts. Everywhere we turn we hear complaints. I can’t spend my money the way I want; I can’t spend my time the way I want; I can’t be myself; I’m under the control of others all the time. And everywhere we meet the addicts - addiction to alcohol and drugs, to compulsive work habits and to obsessive consumption. We trade masters; we stay enslaved.”*

We would recognize today that our real problem is not in achieving freedom, but in learning service under a better master. That every relationship that keeps God at a distance becomes oppressive. To have a sense of urgency about enjoying the Christmas season in such a fashion that others are attracted to Jesus Christ. To have a sense of urgency about loved ones not being led astray from the Gospel of Christ, to have a sense of urgency about not being kicked around by the devil and his demons, to have a sense of urgency about ending our bad habits and forming good ones.

A story is told about a man who was in his backyard with his lawnmower ripped on its side. He was trying to get the blade off so he could sharpen it. He had his biggest wrench attached to the nut but couldn’t budge it. He got a four foot length of pipe and slipped it over the wrench handle to give him leverage. He leaned on it with all of his might, to no avail. Next he took a large rock and banged on the pipe. By this time, he was beginning to get emotionally involved with his lawnmower. Words were almost ready to fly.

About that time his neighbor walked over and said that he had a lawnmower like that one time and that if he remembered correctly, the threads on the bolt went the other way. He reversed his direction, and sure enough, the nut turned easily. This man was delighted to be wrong. Saved from frustration and failure. He never

would have gotten the job done right, no matter how hard he tried, doing it his way.

Dear friends, the Holy Spirit is that neighbor walking on by using his quiet voice to say that perhaps, in Christmases past, we have been going about it in the wrong way. To use II Timothy 3 language, He would remind us that ***all Scripture is inspired by God, that all that is written is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the people of God might be completely equipped for every good work.***

I don't know what has confused you or stressed you out or overwhelmed you in Christmases gone by. But we do know exactly what will bring clarity and calmness and distinctively Christian joy to your hearts in the one upcoming. It will be a commitment to hearing the familiar Christmas story. It will include an openness to correction, and it will be an ability to see Jesus in all of the traditions and busyness of the season.

***(Story of Cliff Hickman falling asleep next to me in Dr. Rudnick's class at Concordia College / Dr. Rudnick insisting that I wake him up and that Cliff either stay awake or leave. Cliff left.***

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks staying awake, spiritually speaking. Regularly, they put themselves in a position where they hear and enjoy the good news of great joy that is for all the people - to us a Savior is born. To us a Child is given. Frequently, they eat, drink, and are merry at Holy Communion. Daily, they make the sign of the cross and remember who they are and why they are and where they are going.

On their bad days, they get careless, they get sidetracked, they fail, and they do well to make it to the end of the day. On their decent days, they are reasonably calm and collected and centered in Christ, with the result being that they do no harm. And on their best days, they enjoy the season in such a way that others are attracted to Christ and His Church. In Jesus' Name. Amen.