



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Advent 1 Year B

#### Keep Awake!

[RCL] Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

*“Keep awake!”*

Have you ever stayed up all night?

Christ calls to his disciples and the whole Church to “keep awake,” to keep alert. This idea of keeping awake is at the heart of Advent, a time of waiting and watching, but it also calls to mind a very human thing: to stay awake when you would normally be sleeping.

New parents certainly know what it means to keep awake — to be up in the middle of the night caring for a child. Youth leaders everywhere have endured the crucible of the “lock-in” — when the church is overrun by teenagers for an entire night, who stay up playing games and making mischief while everyone else sleeps.

There are also many professions that require keeping awake through the night: paramedics, firefighters, police, and other first responders, military personnel, and hospital night staff must keep awake during the wee hours of the night. Some cleaning, restaurant, retail, and factory staff must keep vigil, working through the night to complete their work.

At some point, every person has cause to be awake through the night, whether for work, for play, for a child or ailing loved one, for an emergency, or for a long night out. Depending on the circumstances, it can be either exhausting or exhilarating, or some combination of both.

Many people keep awake to accomplish something. There’s a documentary called *The Barkley Marathons: The Race That Eats Its Young*. It’s a 100+ mile endurance race in the Tennessee mountains. It includes five loops of 20 miles, though the participants will tell you that the loop is actually closer to a marathon, or 26 miles. The race is 1/3 on trails and 2/3 off trails, and runners often get lost. The loop goes over mountains and through huge briars, and over the course of the race, runners gain and lose 60,000 feet of elevation, for a total of 120,000 feet of elevation change.

*Completing the race takes five loops, and almost no one finishes.* Runners run day and night, and they have only sixty hours to complete the race. If they sleep at all, it’s only for an hour or two over the course of that sixty hours.

Talk about keeping awake.

The start of the race is variable. Runners are told to show up at a particular day and time, but the race start time varies according to the race directors' whims. A conch shell is blown sometime within a 12-hour window, signaling that the race starts in one hour. This could be anytime between midnight and noon. Some years the race begins in the dark; some years it doesn't.

*Keep awake. Keep alert.*

Lazarus, co-creator of the Barkley Marathons, says, "People who have trouble with [any of the various last minute or informal race details] are not going to do well on the course, because [no matter what,] it's not going to happen the way you planned it."

This, essentially, captures both the spirit of Advent and the theme of our Gospel reading today.

Keep awake. Be alert, and remember: this is going to be difficult. It's not going to happen the way you planned it.

At the beginning of this chapter of Mark, Jesus is walking out of the temple in Jerusalem with his disciples when they point up and exclaim, "What large stones, and what large buildings!" (Mark 13:1). Most of the disciples are rural guys, after all — like many people who go to a major city for the first time, the huge structures that they see can be impressive.

Jesus cryptically tells them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

If you imagine someone saying this in Times Square today, you're approximating the effect Jesus had by saying this. He's telling them that disaster is coming, and it has a chilling effect on the disciples. They're intrigued, naturally, and want to know more about all of this, namely, when it will happen.

Jesus tells them, in so many words: *keep awake*. And he doesn't give them specifics, I imagine because, like Lazarus from the Barkley Marathons says, "It's not going to happen the way you planned it." They want the specifics so that they can make a plan, when the best thing to do is simply keep alert.

As Christmas approaches, many of us begin (or continue) our fervent preparations to celebrate Jesus' birth. Clergy and musicians and choirs prepare for services, as many of us prepare for travel or the arrival of loved ones or family dinners or community parties or frantically wondering what we will do or where we will go this year.

The coming of Christmas creates, in most of us, a sense of both longing and urgency. We call ourselves to keep alert, keep awake, to work hard to get ready for this holiday that's coming whether we like it or not.

And many years, it doesn't happen the way we plan it. We have to adapt and adjust and keep awake — we have to stay on our toes.

As we stress over the coming holiday, Advent calls us to prepare for something much bigger than the yearly arrival of Christmas. Advent calls us to pay attention to the world around us, even as it is wracked with suffering, violence, and hunger. The first Sunday of Advent begins a story of cosmic proportions, with the sun being darkened and the stars falling from heaven.

Advent, in all the readings today, reminds us that our ancestors once called out for a Savior, and that we in the Church wait for the return of one. We wait, and we hope, knowing nothing other than to keep working, keep watching, and keep awake.

In our world torn by pain and division, we look at the pain all around us and we wonder, “how long?” How long will people in our own country and around the world have to live in fear in their communities, in their schools, and in their own homes? How long will we live at odds with our neighbors and endure division in our families? How long will people have to endure violence and hunger and pain, right up to our own doorstep?

In our lowest points, we are tempted to wonder if things will be this way forever.

But this season that we begin today — Advent — has a presence that calls us to look deeper. It whispers to us, urgently, in the dead of winter: “*Keep awake!*” It is a call of urgency and longing, but also a call of promise: there is hope. Things will not always be as they are. Something is coming that is even bigger than Christmas.

The world still waits for justice. The world still waits for peace.

The world still waits for God.

Like the Barkley Marathoners, and like the disciples, we wait in darkness, knowing that we cannot know the specifics. We can only stay ready for what we know is coming — opportunity. Victory. Hope.

Peace on earth.

Advent whispers to us: the night is long and difficult, but the dawn is coming.

*“And what I say to you I say to all — keep awake!” (Mark 13:37)*

*The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior’s Lutheran Church (ELCA) in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born in rural Alabama, considers Atlanta home, and lives in and adores New England. She has worked in a variety of ministry settings, urban and rural, both in the parish and in hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, Anna enjoys climbing the nearby mountains, traveling, exploring cities and nightlife, and keeping up with politics.*