

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2020

Lectionary Year B: Mark 13:24-37

Having been put out of service for the last several weeks due to the dreaded Coronavirus, I must say that I am very happy and, indeed, fortunate to be back here with you this morning. My road to recovery spanned nearly two weeks, with a lot of aches, pains, and general malaise along the way.

Was it the sickest I'd ever been in my life? No, but it certainly hung around long enough. I can only compare my experience to a kind of purgatory in which you're not brink-of-death ill, but you're not well enough to do or enjoy anything, either. For nearly two weeks, I merely existed...unproductive and without motivation or appetite.

Naturally, I was besieged by pangs of guilt and shame. Clearly, it is not okay for someone with a background in public health to come down with something that public health has been trying so diligently to prevent. Surely, those who come down with Covid are the reckless and careless who go to motorcycle rallies in South Dakota and defiantly refuse to wear masks in public (witnessing more to their willful ignorance than to any proper American understanding of liberty). So, what kind of stigma is associated with simply contracting the virus in the first place? Hopefully, the forthcoming vaccine and subsequent end to the pandemic will make any such stigma a thing of the past; after all, not everyone gets Covid as a result of misbehaving...

Then, most importantly, we need to remember all those who have been much less fortunate than I have. By most measures, mine was a "mild" case of Covid, and I required neither hospitalization nor pharmacological intervention for my illness.

But thousands upon thousands of other Covid sufferers have, many of whom haven't left our hospitals alive. Thus, I am almost compelled to walk around wearing a disclaimer that reads: "Results not typical." I believe that those who survive this virus bear an enormous responsibility to not minimize or deny the seriousness of its effects on global health, because eventually, the global will become local, and the vague statistic will be your neighbor, your friend, your loved one, or yourself.

Whenever the season of Advent rolls around, we hear tidings of the return of Christ...and these are not typically glad tidings. No, they seem filled with portent and doom, instead. And often, as is the case today, they urge us to remain watchful and vigilant, because we don't know when the hour will be. To be quite honest, this could be interpreted as a less-than-reassuring motif for our times. In times of pandemic, we can easily fall into feelings of hopelessness and helplessness in which we sit and wonder, "Who will be next?" Then, we are more inclined to dread the inevitable than to look forward in hope.

And ultimately, Advent is a hope-filled season. We prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth with a watchfulness and vigilance that knows neither the day nor the hour, but yet with an assurance that this Advent will be of something great and glorious. Surely, such a thought is almost foreign to us now, as we face an ongoing fatigue of hopelessness and helplessness brought on by months of grim statistics and loss of life. But now, we are about to turn a corner -- a glimmer of hope comes to us with news of a vaccine, and we can look ahead to the possibility of the year 2021 being one in which we can gather like we used to and enjoy concerts and theatrical productions without this black cloud looming over us. And still, we hear Jesus' advisory, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33).

In fact, we can keep alert for good things to happen. If there's anything we might do when good things happen, may it be for us to avail ourselves to them, which would include, naturally, our long-awaited vaccine.

And we remember, too, that our Lord who is to come -- Jesus Christ -- is the Healer to whom we look for restoration of health and strength. He is the One whose arrival we await who will heal us of our illnesses and will heal the greatest wound of all between God and humanity -- the wound of sin. Lest we become preoccupied by the cozy and sentimental imagery of our Lord's birth, we remember, above all, what his coming means to us -- healing, life, forgiveness, and reconciliation. His is like a vaccine that undoes the damage of sin. The life that he gave for us opens for us the door to eternal life. His forgiveness poured out upon us on the cross makes forgiveness possible everywhere else. And the reconciliation he accomplished between God and humanity means that sin no longer has the final say. How couldn't we keep awake for such great glory to come?

Jesus said, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). In times of such tremendous uncertainty, these are about the last words we want to hear. When will our world be rid of this horrible virus? When will we be able to gather safely with our loved ones again? When will we return to our offerings of hugs and handshakes without fear of either transmitting or receiving a deadly virus? The unsatisfying answer to these questions would be, seemingly, "Only God knows." But, as plain reality would have it, there are only certain things that we can know, there are only certain things that we can control, and there are only certain things that we can determine. For us to have the humility to acknowledge these things is a big step toward becoming people of faith. Can we trust God that things will work out even if we cannot know where or when? That would seem to be

a big part of "keeping awake."

The good news here is that God will be faithful to those who keep awake. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31). His promise -- equally sure as his warning -- will stand firm. What is said is there for the ages to believe...right down to us. While we surely will not -- and cannot -- know the day or the hour, we abide in faith knowing that our Lord's promise will be real for us. It is what his Advent in this world sought and still seeks to accomplish now and forevermore.

And as we receive a glimmer of hope with the coming of a vaccine for the Coronavirus, we are reminded of a similar hope we carry with us each and every Advent season -- the hope of healing and redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet both of these call us to be watchful instead of complacent and careful instead of reckless. There's still a ways for us to go before we'll all be safe from the virus...just as the Nativity of Our Lord is still several weeks away. And lest we consider ourselves hopeless and helpless amid this ongoing pandemic, we can always be assured of things we can do to reduce the virus' spread; surely, we know the litany by now -- wear a facial covering, practice physical distancing, and avoid large gatherings. These are but a few ways that we can, in the words of Jesus, "Beware, keep alert."

Yet, the One who is really in charge of everything keeps us expectant of the true glory to come -- a glory that conquers sin, disease, and death. This is, after all, Jesus Christ, whose Advent into this world brings healing, life, forgiveness, and reconciliation...all on God's time, and yet just when we need it. Why do we keep awake? Well, probably because God is offering us something we can't afford to miss. In fact, it would be dangerous, reckless, and foolish for us to be lulled into a complacent slumber. And thus, we remain watchful and vigilant for

the Advent of our salvation.

Amen.