

“KEEP AWAKE, BE ALERT: GREGOREITE!”

A sermon for Sunday, December 03, 2017, by the Rev. Dr. James Mutayoba
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Gospel: **Mark 13:24-37** ²⁴ *But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; ²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*

²⁶ *At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.*

²⁸ *Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*

THE DAY AND HOUR UNKNOWN

³² *But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.*

³⁵ *Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”*

It is Advent and our focus is on two things: awaiting Jesus second coming as Judge of the world and, at the same time, celebrating His first coming -- the incarnation (“The Word became flesh and came to dwell among us....”)

One of the primary traditions of Advent is lighting four candles on the Advent wreath -- one every week as the season goes by. Each candle represents an aspect of spiritual preparation. The symbolic meanings of the candles can vary but they are often:

- **Hope** -- expectation of what is to come (sometimes called the prophecy candle)
- **Love** -- Sometimes called the Bethlehem Candle
- **Joy** -- The rose candle (often called Mary's Candle)
- **Peace** -- Sometimes called the Angel's Candle

Historically, the Color for Advent has been purple. Purple is still used in many churches, but other churches have chosen to use blue (in banners or clergy vestments) and reserve purple for Lent. Either blue or purple is acceptable for Advent.

Today we are given a Scripture reading from Mark 13. This is an apocalyptic text with eschatological implications. I must confess that I am reluctant to preach on apocalyptic texts because I don't want to speculate about the end of time. But, here we go.

As Jesus was leaving the Temple (Mark 13:1), his disciples said “**Teacher, look at these magnificent buildings! Look at the impressive stones of these walls.**” The Temple was a

wonderful piece of masonry work and beautiful architecture. But Jesus responded saying, **“Yes these are great buildings but they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another.”** So, Peter, James, John and Andrew came to him privately saying, **“Tell us when this will happen!”**

So Jesus gave them the prophetic images I just read as part of today’s Gospel text.

But first, I want to start with the name of my uncle ... my mother's older brother. He was called Gregory. How is your uncle’s name related to the text, you may ask? Well the name Gregory comes from the Greek word - **Gregoreo** (the same in Latin). I do not know whether there is anyone called **Gregory** or **Gregoreo** here today ... if there is, I wonder whether you know the meaning of your name? (I do not intend to embarrass any Gregory(s) or Gregoreos, but most names have meanings.) The name Gregory comes from the Greek word **gregoreo** which means to prepare. I don’t think my uncle knew the spiritual meaning of his name either. Parents frequently give a name because they love the pronunciation perhaps without even knowing the meaning. The name Greg does sound good, does it not?

But Jesus used the **imperative ‘gregoreite’** (**‘BE prepared’**) to answer his disciples’ question regarding the destruction of the Temple and what would happen thereafter. Jesus described the signs, *but emphasized* that *they must* **‘be prepared’** (that very day) for nobody knows the time.

Today’s airways are filled with sounds of Christmas carols and scenes of the manger. Images of Santa Claus are popping up in our neighborhoods. Everywhere you go, houses are lit up with colorful lights. TV commercials saturate the air with enticements for us to BUY in the name of SAVE. But the writer of the Gospel of Mark had a different vision.

When the evangelist Mark looked up at the sky he saw **cosmic fireworks**. He saw a **darkened sun**, a **dimmed moon**, **stars falling from the sky** like sparks of fireworks, and the **powers in heaven shaking** -- and in the center of it all, he saw **the Son of Man**, **the Lord Jesus**, descending in the clouds with **great power** and **glory** and multitudes of angels. It was the vision of Jesus’ second coming.

Mark does not see a vision of a baby lying in the Manger. He does not see the heavenly angels singing. Mark does not see the shepherds or the Maggi coming to worship the new born King. He doesn’t see frankincense, gold, and myrrh. All that Mark sees are cosmic signs of the end time -- the Lord Jesus as Judge and the world becoming a compost of debris.

The Lord describes his second coming as being preceded (or accompanied) by cosmic signs while cautioning us about **false teachers** and **false prophets** (whom we see on TV

today, or have seen before -- men like Jim Jones, David Koresh, and others). Jesus says, ***“Take heed, watch and pray, for you do not know the time not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son of Man but only the Father.”***

Images of the end of the world have always fascinated preachers. Some interpret natural and man-made catastrophic events as signs of the end of time -- hurricanes, mudslides, earthquakes, wild fires, extinct volcanoes coming alive again. Wars in places like Syria, Iraq, Yemen. The threat of ISI Islamist(s). A looming war on the Korean peninsula. These are all on the **radar of preachers**. We are overwhelmed by scientists who predict that the earth's axis may shift causing unwanted changes on earth. There is talk of asteroids orbiting the solar system, threatening to destroy the earth.

The return of the Jewish people to Israel from all over the world has been interpreted as another sign given by Jesus, when he said: ***“the Son of Man will come on the clouds with great power and glory, ...he will send his angels to gather together his elect from the four winds....”***

We are all fascinated by all these things as indicators of the end of time. However, it is hard, and even wrong, to use apocalyptic images from books like Daniel, Revelation or even the text in Mark we just read to pinpoint the exact end of time. It is a misuse and exploitation of these texts to stir up chaos and fear among believers.

The Lord warns us against such fascinations with the following words: ***“Keep watch! Gregoreite! Be alert! For you do not know when the master of the house will come, -- in the evening, or at midnight, at cock one, or at dawn, lest he finds you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you - I say to all, Be awake!”***

Jesus says, ***gregoreite, -- Be awake! Be alert!***

When Jesus says, it could be -- ***evening, midnight, cockcrow, or near dawn***, he again emphasizes no exact time or season. He wants believers to always ***gregoreite***, to be ***alert!***

Jesus is using sleep to describe believers lack of awareness to what's around them. When we are asleep we do not know what is happening inside or around us. Yet ***sleep*** is one of ***the surest signs of our trust in God***.

- Sleep has a powerful hold on our bodies - ***Evening, midnight, cockcrow, and toward dawn are not meant to be specific***. They are simply times when people are enjoying their sleep. These are not the best of times to be awake - even as dawn approaches. That's why some turn on alarm clocks. They need assistance from an alarm clock to wake up!!

- There is spiritual napping, when we take our eyes off Jesus. Many of us cannot wake up from our spiritual napping. We are stuck!!
- There are times when we lie in bed and cannot sleep. With time on our hands and a lot of things to worry about, we roll over and toss about! Fear takes control of our lives. Some may run to the medicine cabinet to take a sleeping pill! It is important to note that lack of sleep because of worry is not classified as spiritual wakefulness. It is not the same thing as spiritual preparedness. In fact, it is the opposite of it.
- There is also **Induced sleep**. For example, being put under anesthesia before surgery. Unusual heaviness takes place in the mind and body and puts us to sleep while the world around us goes away -- no pain --- only darkness and oblivion. But induced sleep is not the spiritual sleepiness that the Lord is warning us about. Spiritual awareness is still there, even under anesthesia. We are still spiritually prepared or spiritually conscious!

As hard as it is to be alert - Jesus says, Be alert!!!

As long as it takes, Be alert!

As troubling as it feels! Be alert!

As helpless as you might feel! Be alert !!

Gregoreite! Be alert!

Wake up to the things you are afraid of!!

Be a servant in charge!!

Stay awake to see Christ as he comes in his glory!!

Be ready!

Amen.