

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44

“³⁶ But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows.

³⁷⁻³⁹ “The Arrival of the Son of Man will take place in times like Noah’s. Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing—until the flood hit and swept everything away.

³⁹⁻⁴⁴ “The Son of Man’s Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind. So, stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up.

Timothy Merrill, wrote the following blog post on “The Homiletics Blog,” November 20, 2007; titled, “How to Sleep During a Sermon—Without the Preacher Noticing.”

At the school where my wife teaches, a high school student published a little article in her school paper called, "How to Sleep in Class—and Get Away with It." You can see the obvious parallels. So, with apologies to Tiffany Chen, I have adapted the material to offer the following, because, if you're a preacher, you might find that some of your regular, faithful worshipers are, in fact, catching up on their Saturday night sleep while you're explaining the meaning of Ephesians 2, or droning on about the relationship between faith and science, or expounding on how to live faithfully in a post-modern world.

ONE: Never fall asleep flat on the pew. To keep this from happening, it's actually better to sit in a crowded pew, shoulder to shoulder with people on your left and right. Otherwise, if you fall asleep, you might lean right over on the pew and that's not good.

TWO: When you sleep, don't fall completely asleep, but just power nap instead. If you fall completely asleep, your sleep apnea might kick up and that's embarrassing. Better to just go half-asleep, so that you're vaguely aware of your surroundings. It helps to use a Bible to prop your chin up, or lean against your head. You can close your eyes, as long as the Bible is in view because the preacher will think you're praying. If you power nap, you'll be ready if the pastor asks you to pronounce the benediction.

THREE: Have a friend be a watcher. Sit with someone who's sympathetic to your plight. Your spouse may not be the right person. You need a friend who will nudge you if the preacher seems to be looking in your direction a lot. Make sure a Bible is open on your lap, or is prominently in view. Your friend can rouse you so that you can say "Amen" and get back to your nap.

FOUR: Don't sit in the back pew. Believe it or not, this is the first-place preachers look for sermon slackers. If you sit in the first or second pew, you can actually get more sleep in because preachers will just look right past you.

FIVE: Don't sleep through the entire sermon. After all, the preacher has something from the Lord you probably need to hear. But when you've heard it, you have no further obligation to stay awake. Still, if you can be awake for some of the sermon, you can then refer to it when you're leaving the church and shaking the pastor's hand. "Wonderful sermon, Reverend! I especially enjoyed the part where"

So, there you go. Hope this doesn't fall into the wrong hands.

This is the first Sunday of Advent 2025 and Jesus’ message for us from today’s scripture reading is , "Stay awake!" It’s right there in verse 42. Jesus was talking about his eventual return when he said this—obviously acknowledging a time when he will no longer physically be in this earthy dwelling place. We have heard him mention his return through the scriptures we have read on the last two Sundays. We’re reminded that no one knows when he will return. He doesn’t even know, but we’re supposed to stay awake to pay attention so we can be ready. However, for some people, Jesus’ warning about no one knowing when he will return can

sound ominous. Feeling on edge, some people may interpret Jesus’ command to “Stay Awake,” means we should be actively looking for the signs of his return.

Jesus seems to sneer at sleep as he commands us to keep alert and to be ready. You can hear it when he shares an analogy with the time of Noah and the great flood. Jesus said, "But understand this: if the owner 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 unexpected hour" (vv. 43-44).

How are we meant to stay awake when our lives in this nation are so busy already? We always have something to do—jobs, school, entertainment, taking care of our stuff—even going to church. Many of us already feel we do not get enough sleep.

Perhaps the current world record holder for staying awake would have some advice for us on how to stay awake. Robert McDonald currently holds that record. He stayed awake for 453 hours and 40 minutes, that’s 18 days and 21 hours. Wikipedia says that the Guinness World Records no longer accepts new attempts for safety reasons. There are articles about the hazards Robert and others endured from their lack of sleep.

Scientists tell us that sleep is a vital component of overall good health for humans. And they know why the lack of it is bad for us. Skipping sleep can lead to loss of memory, high blood pressure, obesity, slurred speech, impaired decision-making ability, and an increased risk of heart attacks.

What business then does Jesus have in telling us to stay awake. I think we can all agree that he obviously did not mean that we literally should not go to bed. And Jesus is also not saying we should worry ourselves—making it a priority to “read the signs of the times” so we can determine when he will return. We’re missing the point if that is our focus for living.

No, what Jesus is saying is that he doesn’t want us to go through life like a sleepwalker— a person who goes through life without seeing or noticing what's going on all around them. He doesn’t want us to be like the people in Noah’s day who were not aware of how they had fallen away from God. The bible doesn’t tell us that Noah warned the people about the flood, but it does tell us that he was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), and so, he may have preached about the coming judgement—if not in word, most certainly through his obedience in building the ark, which took about 100 years. I read somewhere that Noah was like the guy wearing a sandwich board sign—"The End is Near".

Jesus is telling us through today’s text that it's time for us to open not only our eyes, but also our spirits so that we can be aware of how God is moving and guiding us through our lives.

An illustration that I found uses this more current analogy—Jesus is warning against being "asleep at the switch," which is an expression that originated in the railroad industry. It refers to someone who has missed something important, has not noticed some critical detail or who might be placing themselves or others in danger because of a lack of attention. If an engineer dozes off while tending the switches that guide the train, it could easily cause a crash. The point being—it really is vital that we "stay awake" to what is going on around us.

Jesus urges us to stay awake—so that we don’t miss something important— and so we can be ready to respond to the needs around us. He tells us that we need to stay attentive to what is happening all around us, locally, nationally, and worldwide, so that we can notice God at work in our midst. One of the messages of Advent—my friends—it’s time to wake up our spirits so that we can be aware of God's presence in our lives.

Jesus does not want us to close our spirits and, therefore, miss God’s movement in our lives. We can easily move through our day as though we are wearing blinders. We can busy ourselves with non-essential stimuli such as television, social media, shopping, stress, anger, and worry—anything, that can dominate our thoughts and activities—and sleepwalk right past God.

Jesus commands us to be watchful and to expect the unexpected. Jesus talks about a God who will surprise us by coming when we're not looking or arriving with an appearance that we do not expect. This powerful Advent passage reminds us to be aware that the God who came into the world as a baby so many years ago still wishes to enter our lives today. Too often we find ourselves aligning with the innkeepers of the world, who turn away the Christ with the words, "no room." Our minds are full, our calendars are packed, our

expectations are low, so we're not actively looking for and seeking the living Christ in our midst. We're too busy and our minds are too occupied; without even noticing we push Jesus away. And so, Jesus cries, "Wake up!"

Max Lucado wrote this story: The thieves broke in at night. It was a large department store in a major metropolitan area. They got in, stayed long enough to do the crime, and scurried away undetected. It is not what you think. They took nothing. Not one item was missing. No merchandise stolen. No money removed. What they did goes down as the most unusual robbery of all time. (2)

Instead of stealing anything, they changed the price tags of everything. Price tags were swapped. Values were changed. The clever pranksters took the \$395 price tag off a camera and stuck on it \$5.00 box of stationery. The \$5.95 sticker for a paper-back book was placed on an outboard motor. The thieves repriced everything in the store. Crazy.

It gets crazier. The store opened. The employees came to work. Customers rolled in and shopped. And for four hours nobody noticed a thing. For four hours the store functioned under the new pricing. Many got some great bargains. Some got fleeced. Hard to believe? No!

Advent arrives with the invitation to open our hearts and minds to the arrival of the Christ—now. If Jesus knocks on the door of our lives, we want to be awake enough to invite him inside. We know that some churches often get lulled into the complacency of thinking "we have always done it that way"—closing the door on Jesus without realizing it—making the congregation comfortable, yet lifeless and keeping those not in the “club” out.

Are we going through life the same way—closing the door on Jesus? Are we actively looking for the Christ in the stranger we pass on the street or in the person checking out our groceries at the store or in our neighbor or even in our family members? Will we be alert enough to recognize the surprising Christ who arrived not in a palace but in a simple cattle manger? How will the Christ come to us, and will we recognize him when he does? What can we do during Advent to be more intentional about welcoming Christ into our lives? Jesus calls us to be aware of the changes we need to make in our lives—and even more, to **make** those necessary changes—so we do not become lifeless.

Asking ourselves questions like the following can help us put our focus on where it should be so we will stay awake. What good things—sometimes miracles—are we missing simply because we are too distracted to notice—maybe, because we are more focused on the terrible things that happen around us or in the world? We become obsessed with the bad in our world instead of noticing the good which can encourage us. What blessings are we passing by because our minds are consumed with endless details? Are we blindly stumbling through our lives unaware of God's presence all around us? Jesus' words sound almost like a sad plea when we consider what we might be missing. It doesn't need to be that way.

Jesus is nudging our souls awake and asking us to open our eyes to what is true—God is breaking into the world. Advent reminds us of the Emmanuel—the Good News that God is with us. Advent can be a time of increased awareness.

Jesus isn't telling us to break out the coffee or energy drinks so that we can stay awake—just for our own sakes. He is instead calling us and inviting us to be aware—both of the needs all around us and of the presence of the living God to help us offer support to those in need. Jesus's command is a call to action today to wake up now instead of tomorrow. We can't be lazy. Let's not sleep our lives away—literally or figuratively—but instead, let's roll up our sleeves and answer the call to share the hope that God is with us now! Let's help to get everyone awake to Emmanuel!

Listen, my dear friends, the extraordinary good news of Advent is that God chooses to be with us—**He chooses to be with us now!** God enters into our world desiring a relationship with us. The bad news is that we are often unaware of this miracle. The season of Advent can be a time when we take Jesus' call to "wake up" seriously. Stay awake, sisters and brothers, and look for the God who promises to come to us. Amen.