

Advent 1 – November 27, 2011  
Resurrection Lutheran Church, Lakeview  
Rev. Elizabeth Palmer

Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9 / Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 / 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 / Mark 13:24-37  
Hymn: Hark! A Thrilling Voice is Sounding (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #246)

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Grace to you and peace from our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

And greetings from Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Chicago, where students sport t-shirts that say “where fun comes to die” and “if I’d wanted an ‘A’ I would have gone to Harvard” and where this beloved bumper sticker hangs in my office: *Jesus is coming, look busy!* There’s a dark truth to this bumper sticker, which encapsulates the frantic realization that when we’re called to account the most we’ll probably be able to do is fake it. My campus ministry students greatly appreciate this sort of humor, perhaps because most college and graduate students know a little something about faking it. It’s also true that University of Chicago students are among the smartest people in the world, and yet many of my students, perhaps because they are Lutherans and thus hyper-aware of the radical fallenness of the world, are convinced that they aren’t as smart as everyone believes them to be; that they got accepted to the University of Chicago by accident and that at any moment they might be found out and the whole charade will come crashing down. This kind of resigned desperation that comes with the knowledge of one’s weaknesses is precisely the sentiment behind the bumper sticker slogan: *Jesus is coming, look busy.* We don’t know when Jesus will come, but we know that his coming will involve a judgment, like the one described last week in the story of the sheep and the goats, and we fear that we just might be the goats. Whatever Jesus expects us to be doing when he comes, we will likely not live up to his expectation. Perhaps the most we can do in such a situation is to fake it, to pretend to be busy.

But perhaps the bumper sticker misses the point. Perhaps the point of Jesus' coming is not about us being busy at all. Perhaps it's God who does the busy work in order that we might be the inheritors of God's gracious redemption, so that we might live out radical hope even in the face of our own failures. Perhaps more important than what *we* do or appear to be doing when Jesus comes is what *God* is doing: *in* us and *among* us, and sometimes *in spite of* us, and most certainly *for* us. Today is, after all, the first Sunday in Advent, the time of year when we focus our expectation on the child in the manger, God born into this fallen world in order to bring us salvation. In this child will be the redemption of all the world: let us prepare to adore him!

But the truth of Advent is that while we await each year the good news of the child in the manger, we simultaneously await his second coming. During these dark cold days of winter as we anticipate a light breaking in, this baby in the manger is intricately connected with the return of Christ at the end of the ages, past and future linked by the trust that redemption happens when God breaks into our world. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come!* Enough already of the old, come again into our human history and make all things new!

It sounds nice enough in theory, but in Mark's gospel Jesus doesn't paint a rosy picture of sunshine and rainbows at the end of time. These words about the return of Christ are downright frightening. He says the sun will be darkened and the stars will fall from heaven. The Son of Man who comes in great power and glory will gather the elect, presumably leaving others behind. Heaven and earth will pass away. There will be chaos. There will be tribulation. There will be suffering. In today's gospel lesson, the sweet baby in the manger has grown into a cranky man on his way to the cross, and we can't ignore his words of warning. *Beware; watch; be alert; be on guard; stay awake.* The gospel writer was likely writing around the time of the Roman-Jewish war, which culminated in the destruction of the temple in the year 70 A.D.

Tribulation and chaos indeed. Apocalyptic writings often come out of communities suffering persecution. Their temple was destroyed; it must have seemed to them as if the world had ended.

But we have to believe that Jesus' words are also meant for us. *Be alert; watch; stay awake.* Jesus is speaking to us too. And how often we fail at these tasks! We simply cannot stay awake all the time, even in the metaphorical wakefulness that Jesus intends for us. We're not even fully aware of our own weaknesses, let alone attuned to the chaos and tribulations and sufferings of those outside of our circles. How can we be empathetic with those who exist outside our field of vision, our sisters and brothers near and far, seen and unseen? Limited by our sinful nature, by the profound brokenness of the world and our inability to fix it; we live most of the time as if asleep to the needs of the world. As one biblical commentary puts it, "There are so many forms of sleepwalking—the glazed eyes which never notice that one's ideals are being whittled away, one's purposes being pared down; never notice the evil forces in the world, gaining strength."<sup>1</sup> In the face of this predicament, what can we do? What does it mean to prepare the way for the Lord when we can't even prepare our own way through life without abundant grace from God? What does it mean to keep watch when we, like the disciples at his side in the garden of Gethsemane, can't help but fall asleep when left on our own?

It means a few things for us as Christians in a fallen world. First of all, it means that we are called to repent. You probably know that the Greek word for thanksgiving is *eucharist*, which connects the secular holiday that we celebrated a few days ago with our lives of faith through the sacrament that we receive at this table. But did you know that in 1863, as the Civil War raged, Abraham Lincoln established the final Thursday in November as a day of national

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<sup>1</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII (Matthew & Mark)*, George Arthur Buttrick, Walter Russell Bowie, and Paul Scherer, eds. (New York: Abingdon, 1951), p. 865.

repentance? That was the beginning of Thanksgiving as a legal national holiday, and more importantly it was a moment of communal wakefulness that is rare in this country: recognizing our shortcomings as a nation and gathering together to lament for such failures. Repentance, not only individual or communal repentance during the liturgy but also enacting a larger social penitence for the violence in which we are all complicit, might be a start to the kind of wakefulness that Jesus asks of us. This is a repentance that comes not out of fear, but out of the grace that we receive from God, beginning right here at this table, and the gratitude that we carry forth in our bodies.

And despite our sleepfulness, there are moments when God calls us to arise, and when we call one another to arise. We do this well in those times when we gather as people of faith around those who suffer: when we cook and serve dinners for The Night Ministry, as my campus ministry students do and as your congregation does; when clergy and labor leaders collaborate to hear and voice the stories of the oppressed; when we advocate and organize for social justice in our local communities; when we share the story of our faith with a world that is hurting; and when we articulate hope in situations of lament.

*Awake; keep watch!* Sleepwalkers though we are, we repent and we arise, called by God again and again. We do these things *not* because they will bring about God's kingdom any more quickly, because as Jesus reminds us, that is the work of God and it happens on God's timeline: it may happen in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. We do these things because it is our calling: God calls us to repent and to arise from our slumbers and to care for a broken world. As for the end of time, we don't need to fake it by pretending to be busy, as the bumper sticker suggests. We need simply to rest on the promises of God. Because as our biblical commentator reminds us, the essence of Mark's idea of the end of time was not in an

expectation of its precise literal fulfillment, but rather, writes the commentator who I quoted to you earlier, “its essence was something deeper: the faith that God is a factor in the world, today and tomorrow; that [God] will act redeemingly in human history; that the conquest of evil comes not of our wit and muscle, but of [God’s] continuing sovereignty.”<sup>2</sup> What a wonderful statement of faith: “God will act redeemingly in human history.” My spell check insists that *redeemingly* is not a word, and yet, here we are gathered around the cross and the font and the table and the word, and we know that *redeemingly* is a very real word, and that it’s the kind of Word that remains even if heaven and earth should pass away.

*Redeemingly* is precisely how God regards us: coming into our world as a tiny crying infant in a manger and healing and preaching the good news; bringing hope to the suffering and orienting the arc of history toward justice; calling us again and again to arise despite our sleepiness. Although *redeemingly* might not be the first word that came into your mind when you heard the gospel lesson this morning, we gather each week confident that God intervenes gracefully in human history. We are sustained in such trust, even in the face of difficult gospel texts like the one we heard this morning, because we know that this strange apocalyptic chapter from Mark is part of a larger gospel story that will culminate in a crucifixion and a resurrection.

Two days later, the next chapter tells us, was the start of Passover. Think again about the words you heard this morning. *When the Son of Man returns in power and glory the sun will darken* Jesus says, only days before he would hang on the cross while darkness descends over the land. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down*, cries out the prophet Isaiah, and we know that the curtain of the temple would soon be torn in two, just as the heavens had been torn open at Jesus’ baptism. *Keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the*

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 863.

*house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn.* But we do know that at evening Jesus would gather with his disciples for the last supper, and that at midnight he would be arrested, and that at cockcrow Peter would deny him, and that at dawn he would stand trial before Pontius Pilate and be condemned to death on a cross. And we know that as he stands before the high priest, questioned whether he is the Messiah, he would seal his fate by quoting again those words from Daniel, *you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.* The end of time that Jesus describes in today's story from Mark sounds a lot like the story of his crucifixion.

And we know that in this story there is redemption, because in the suffering of the cross resides the glory of the resurrection, on which all of our hope is founded, and in which the world is transformed, and through which we are awakened from our slumbers and called to live justly, alert and hopeful, awaiting with confidence that day when Christ will return to embrace the world in mercy, forgiveness, and love. Jesus is coming, so repent, arise, and rest in the promises of God. Amen.