

“Guarding the House of Faith”

Texts: Isaiah 63:16-17, 64:1-8

1 Cor 1:3-9 (Series B, 1st Sunday in Advent, Ps.80:1-7, 17-19)

Mark 13:24-37

Prayer:

Welcome to Advent, a season of hopeful waiting, and the beginning of a new Liturgical year B. The name *advent* comes from the Latin *adventus* meaning "arrival" or "coming, We are to spend the four weeks before Christmas, preparing ourselves and our souls in hope and with repentance for our sins, as we await the birth of Jesus, our Redeemer Christ.

Since Advent promises the coming of the Lord, it's message is "Prepare", "*Watch out*". The Lord is coming whether the world is ready or not. But how does the advent season suggest that we prepare? I believe three areas of our lives need further preparation:

- 1) *Repentance*: 180 turn from self to God.
- 2) *Prayer*: We talk to God to renew his Spirit within us. We pray for the coming of Christ to be real in our life and daily activities. We pray that he will save people from sin.
- 3) *Patience*: His coming may be delayed. We are encouraged to be patient, to *watch* and wait, for his coming may be sudden.

The whole 13th Chapter of Mark's Gospel can be summed up in these words...."*Take heed, Watch and pray; for you do not know when the time will come.*"

Its appeal is *be watchful*, be alert, be on guard. It speaks to us now as it spoke to every generation before us. It is a plea for righteous living on the alert, with eyes, mind and heart on the *watch*.

The word "*Watch*" must reach every area of our life. But the irony is that many of us sleepwalk with glazed eyes which never notice that one's faith, ideals are being taken away.

Or so sleepy in the spirit, we never notice the evil forces in the world gaining strength. *Watch* and pray against the sin that so easily trips us up, the compromise with wrong, so good, so reasonable, so sweet, so comfortable in the beginning; but so deadly in the end.

“*Watch*” the Gospel tells us, lest we neglect the renewal of life, commitment to God our Saviour. *Watch*, lest the great opportunities for service to God’s kingdom come and pass by, unseen and unseized.

I would like to illustrate my point of “*Watchfulness*” this first Sunday in Advent by the way of “*Gin*”. That’s right, you heard me - “GIN”, the intoxicating drink from which many a person has sought to drown the sorrows of life. Don’t be alarmed, I do not intend to spend my time arguing the evils of Gin.

Rather, I want to talk about “gin” because it can help us this morning understand better our text, in which Jesus commands us to be on the *watch* for the coming of the Son of Man.

“Take heed, ***watch***, for you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33). Jesus calls us to vigilant, always prepared. He warns us that the owner of the house will return one day. We know not when - and the owner does not want to find us fallen asleep or sleepwalking with the house unguarded and vulnerable.

There is an intimidation in what Jesus has to say to us this morning. This passage comes at the end of a chapter in Mark where we have received not one, but several warnings about God’s holy will and judgment.

These warnings are not to ignored, even if they come to us in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, when the mood of both our sacred and secular cultures is one of eating, enjoyment, contentment and celebration.

What do “Gin” and our “Gospel” text have in common? The connection is made in a true story from Church history about a group of Christians whose house was indeed left unguarded, and the problem, or at least part of the problem was “gin” or in plain English “booze”.

It all happened in England in the 1800's. At that time England was not a pretty place to be. Although it was on the threshold of becoming a great power in the world, England was beset by problems of *poverty, injustice, corruption* and worst of all, *drunkenness*.

The popular drink was cheap "Gin". Over 11 billion gallons of the stuff (booze, that was) was consumed in the year 1750 alone. The horrors of this fearsome social phenomenon of gin drinking are graphically portrayed by William Hogarth in his writings *Gin Lane*.

To this situation the Church was called to protect the house of Faith. when the Church was called upon, the church of that day had fallen asleep or was sleepwalking, It was not on "*Watch*".

Now, listen to this: It was reported that the Church of England had more than 11,000 clergy who were paid from state revenues. A full 6 000 of these clergy did not even set foot in the parishes they were called to serve. These congregations were left in the hands of poorly paid and often forgotten parish workers.

What was taking place, was a corrupt system which put the clergy on the Government payroll. The absentee clergy lived luxuriously, some in London, some even as far away as they could get from the "House" of God they were called to guard and care for.

As you might imagine, chaos reigned in England. England became a spiritual desert. The Church was the object of withering ridicule from leaders of the newly emerging Enlightenment. It was a time of judgement, the warning of Jesus to keep *watch* had gone unheeded.

In this terrible time in the life of a nation and of the Church, John and Charles Wesley began their ministry. They were priests of the Church of England, but because of their emotional style and strong message on renewal and commitment to Jesus Christ, they were not allowed to preach in the Church.

So, they preached the Gospel outside to the unchurched and pagans. They preached literally outside on the streets, in the cornfields, in prison yards and to the miners as they came out of dark holes on the ground. The Wesley brothers preached the personal love of God for each precious soul.

They preached the forgiveness of Christ, Repentance and Commitment to the person of Jesus. They preached the true meaning of life is in the person of Jesus Christ, and not in the bottle of Gin. They preached the whole council of God's word, and thousands found faith and life in Christ Jesus.

But the Wesleys were mocked and ridiculed by the authorities in the Church and by the sophisticated public. To add to the difficulties, John Wesley was a man of poor health. But he kept at it, and the Methodist societies grew. Lay leadership in the Church was fostered. Many lives were turned around for God's kingdom. The Gospel message once again became a powerful force in the Land of England.

In a fairly short time, the Wesley's followers won admiration for their honesty, sobriety, trustworthiness, and their willingness to work hard. Remember this English society was wracked by the evil of alcohol. The style of life of the Methodist led to considerable worldly success. ... So much so that the elder Wesley worried - For he was ever the servant on the *watch*. As Wesley reflected on the lives of Methodists ... he had this to say:

"I fear, whenever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion, ... as riches increase, so will pride, anger and love of the world in all branches." And he concluded with a despairing question:

"Is there no way to prevent this? This continual decay of pure religion." We always seem to fall short as God's people. But whenever we realize our shortfall as witnesses to our Lord, God's command to us, to be on the *Watch*, and to *guard the house of faith*. Our *Hope* truly is in the name of the Lord. Advent hope is active; it is always listening to God; always learning from God, always walking with God.

“**Watch** is a word for us in two ways:

First it can serve to remind us of the heart of the Gospel. Paul’s words to us in the second lesson say: God has promised us that we are his - it means that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain us to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly: Knowing God’s love in our lives and the freedom it brings, we can take to heart Jesus’ command to be *watchful*. Just like old Wesley who never put his guard down, even in the face of success.

But today, like the Church of England in 1750, our problem is *Not* “Gin”, but “relativism” and “indifference”. The people of God / the Church, looks at moral and spiritual issues as “Relative”. There is no good or bad. If it feels good, why not, just do it. Our Church leaders are sleepwalking, and have glazed eyes that can never notice that we are living in dark days.

The state of the Lutheran Church in Canada..... To be honest, I am not happy the direction our beloved Lutheran Church has taken and is heading. Sleepwalking and not being *Watchful* will only lead to chaos and spiritual desert.

When will our leaders stand up for the whole council of God? When are we going to stop undermining God’s word? Revival will only occur when God totally takes charge of our hearts. It begins in the heart.

Today our hope comes from the fact that Christ died once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

So, as we prepare for the Christmas this year, how can we actively wait in hope? May be this Advent God is calling you and I to serve in a special way in our church or community.

Or God is whispering in our ears to turn (180) from worldly sins, to spend extra time in his Word, or pray without losing heart, to recommit our lives over to him in all that we do.

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Finally, “Be patient” - with *watchfulness* - we do not know when the master of the house will return. For when he comes, it is salvation for those who are prepared, but judgment for those who are not. Therefore, let us be on guard! Be alert! And be watchful! **Amen.**

December 3, 2023