

KEEP AWAKE!

A SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 24:36-44

*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.
Matthew 24:42*

Keep awake! How many times have you found yourself nodding off in church? I look out, and from time to time I'll see someone who is obviously getting a lot out of my sermon. That person is nodding along with every sentence.

Back in Arcadia, we used to have a couple of guys in the choir who suffered from sleep apnea. That meant that they didn't get a whole lot of sleep at night, so they would make up for it on Sunday morning, between eleven and twelve. They'd sing the anthem, and then drift off. I could sometimes hear them snoring in harmony, one a baritone, the other almost a *basso profundo*.

My favorite story about sleeping in church involves a deacon in the little church in Perryville, Kentucky. His cattle farm was a section of land, 640 acres, and every Sunday morning, he'd walk his fence line, checking it for breaks. Now a section is a mile on a side, so that was a four mile hike, up hill and down, jumping a creek or two.

Now this deacon, we'll call him Frank, walked his fence line every Sunday morning, went home, had a big breakfast, took a shower, dressed up, came to church, ushered, took up the offering, and sat down right on the second pew. Then he'd stretch his long, tired, legs out. And he'd lean back and look up at the preacher, who was in an elevated pulpit about twelve feet off a tile floor.

One Sunday, I was preaching from the Book of Revelation, chapter 3, verse 20, and I had the big old pulpit Bible open to it. And the Bible kept sliding to one side of the pulpit. Polly said it looked like I was typing my sermon on an old mechanical typewriter, because every time that Bible would get to the edge of the pulpit, I'd push it back.

But I got wound up on one point, and didn't "return the carriage" and the Bible fell twelve feet onto that tile floor. I don't know whether Frank thought it was a thunderclap, or the coming of the Lord, but he jumped up and started trying to get hymnbook open for the closing hymn. Well, needless to say, dropping a Bible will wake up a sleeping deacon!

Jesus told us to keep awake. But it is so hard to do. We are often weary. We have been working so hard, often working hard doing the Lord's work that we drift off. We have so little time to relax, that when we do, we fall asleep.

Many times, I'll find myself nodding off behind the wheel of my truck. That's dangerous. Or I'll just find myself losing focus, not paying attention. I'll miss my turn, or run up behind a slow moving vehicle and with a start, realize that something is happening that I should be aware of.

Several years ago, a fellow by the name of Hudnut, one of the heirs to the shampoo fortune, but an ordained minister, wrote a book about the church, which he titled *The Sleeping Giant*. A few years later, he wrote a sequel, *Arousing the Sleeping Giant*.

He suggested that the church should be the most powerful influence in the world, and that we needed to wake up and change the world in which we live, for the better, that this was the work we needed to be about. He's retired now, is Robert Hudnut, and I suspect if you asked him, he'd tell you that the giant is still sleeping. When I looked him up on the internet, I discovered all of his books are out of print.

Advent is the time when we remember that Jesus said He'd be coming back, and that we are supposed to keep awake until He does. There are always folks who are quick to point to the signs of His coming.

This year, with hurricanes, floods, wars, rumors of wars, forest fires, drought, earthquakes, the threat of volcanic eruptions, those folks are having a field day. But Jesus tells us that no one knows the day and hour, only the Father.

The comparison that Jesus draws to the time of Noah is an apt one for us today. The earth was about to be destroyed. God warned one man, one family, and when that one man, Noah, responded by being faithful and obedient, the rest of the world laughed at him. They were still laughing when the rain started falling, but by the time the rain was finished, no more laughter could be heard.

Jesus tells us that two men will be working side by side in the field, and one will be taken and the other not, and that two women will be working together, grinding meal, and one will be taken and one will not.

We tend to think of the coming of the Lord as a time when the world will end, and everyone will face a final judgment, and the just, the righteous, will go to heaven, and the unjust, the unrighteous, will be condemned to that place where there is darkness and weeping and wailing and the gnashing of teeth.

But the picture here is different. The picture here is much like what I've experienced in the years of my ministry.

I can't tell you how often I've been in a home, to bring comfort and hope at the time of a death, and one has been taken and one has been left. Sometimes it is

the husband who is the one taken, sometimes it is the wife. They were together, side by side, and now one is missing, and the other is bereft.

Back in 2004, we had two official deaths from Hurricane Charley in DeSoto County where I was preaching at the time. In both cases, the husband was taken, and the wife left. In both cases, they were side by side, battening down the hatches, getting ready to ride out the storm. And in both cases, in a heartbeat, in a breath, one was taken and the other left behind.

Advent is the season when we remember that Christ is coming again. But if we think that He is only coming in glory, riding a white horse, accompanied by his army riding on white horses, to sit upon the throne in judgment, we miss what Jesus is saying.

He comes to claim each in order. He was the first, and then He has come back, not once and for all, but time and again. When life becomes a burden, when a disease has taken its toll, when a terrible accident has left a body broken too badly to be mended, when the candle of life has dimmed to a flickering, guttering glow, He comes, and takes His beloved, His own, to be with Him.

Advent is the time when we remember that He came. We will miss loved ones around the Christmas tree, around Christmas time, special ones we've lost in the past, the dearest ones we've lost in the past year. We will miss them, as we remember them.

Remember that Jesus came not only as a little baby, to grow and live and die for our sins, and to be raised for our hope. Remember that He is coming again, to judge all the living as well as the dead. But remember also, that in between those times, He comes, and He claims His own, whom we love to. Remember that the one sitting next to you could be gone by this time next year, or by the end of this year, or by the end of this day. And realize how precious each day, each hour, each moment, may be.

But do not fear His coming. Just be awake, be alert, be watching, be prepared, for He is surely coming, and when He comes, we rejoice in His kingdom that is here and now as well as there and then.

And to the King of Glory the Risen Lord the Coming Christ be power, and honor, dominion and praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more.
Amen.