

Gospel – Mark 13:33-37

Jesus said to his disciples:
"Be watchful! Be alert!
You do not know when the time will come.
It is like a man traveling abroad.
He leaves home and places his servants in charge,
each with his own work,
and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.
Watch, therefore;
you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming,
whether in the evening, or at midnight,
or at cockcrow, or in the morning.
May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.
What I say to you, I say to all: "Watch!"

Gospel Study – *A Time to Wake*

When we come together, I feel the Lord's presence and I feel that we are His disciples. Week by week, He takes a new lesson for us to keep moving along through His teaching, which of course, is His Holy Gospel. This Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, we're beginning a whole new liturgical year and with the new liturgical year we begin a whole new Gospel. This last year we studied the Gospel of Matthew and in this coming year we hear the Gospel of Mark. Let's say just a few things about the Gospels in general and then Mark specifically.

You know there are some people today who have formed what is called the *Jesus Seminar*. Have you heard of the *Jesus Seminar*? A group of scholars have come together from around the world to look at the different verses in the Gospel specifically. They look for and ask, what did Jesus really say? What do we know for sure were His very words? They go through with a fine comb of their own scholarship and research and it's very difficult to know exactly what Jesus said because the Gospels are written in three stages of development.

Now the first stage, of course you could guess, is Jesus' very life and teaching, but nobody was there with a tape recorder and nobody was there taking notes. They would just listen carefully and then take to heart all that He was teaching. The second stage of the Gospel development was when the Apostles went out preaching the message just as Jesus instructed them. They heard what He had said and now they wanted to go and do what He said: *Share that word about His life and death and resurrection to others*. So that's the second phase of Gospel development for the disciples preached about Jesus. The third phase of Gospel development is when the Evangelists started to write down what the Apostles had been preaching for some time because they realized that the early eyewitnesses, the early disciples of Jesus, were starting to die off. They didn't want to lose the great memory, the legacy, the spirituality that Jesus gave to them. And so they began to write it down.

Now Mark was the first to write a Gospel, scholars tell us. Can you guess what year it was? Anybody know? 70 AD. Now mind you, that's 40 some years after Jesus would have died. So

that's awhile and for 40 years His memory was talked about and preached in the oral tradition of their society. They were accustomed to passing on stories. They were in an aural or oral society. They're accustomed to passing on stories and these stories preserve the memory. Now whether it was the exact same word, we don't know, but we trust that the Holy Spirit guided the collection of these stories and the preservation of the stories and of course the writing down of the story.

That is what we believe when the evangelist Mark sat down in 70 A.D. to write his story. He collected from these stories and sayings of Jesus; the way He was born and the way He suffered and died and rose from the dead. All that was put into writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I say all that to realize that in going back, we want to always keep in mind what influenced the writer of the Gospel because he, like any good speaker, had a specific community in mind and was trying to speak to very specific concerns that that community was struggling with.

So, we look at Mark. Does anybody know who Mark was? Was Mark one of the 12 Apostles? No. We first hear about Mark in Acts of the Apostles. He's referred to as John Mark and he was a nephew of? Does anybody know? Of Barnabas. And Barnabas, you might know, was one of the first companions of St. Paul and he took his nephew Mark with him on the first missionary journey with St. Paul. But, soon after they began, just as they were heading into Asia Minor, for some reason John Mark decided he had enough and went home. When they began the second missionary journey and Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, Paul said no way. They got into a real heated argument, and believe it or not, they split their company at that point. Barnabas went off with his nephew Mark in one direction and Paul took Silas in a whole different direction. Evidently they reconciled, and came back together, because at the end of Paul's life we see it's John Mark who's visiting him in the prison in Rome. It was in his last few days and in the letter he wrote to Timothy, he asked him to bring John Mark to Rome because he was a faithful servant.

So, that's who John Mark is. Now remember what I said about the phases of development of the Gospel. Before the writing of the Gospel, Evangelists would've been affected or influenced by the preaching of the Gospel. Would anybody know whose preaching affected Mark's writing? It was St. Peter probably. At least that's what we're told by one of the early Church Fathers in the second century by the name of Papias who said that Mark was Peter's interpreter. We imagine that's true because there is nowhere in any of the other Gospels where we have so many embarrassing details about Peter's life than in Mark. And we figure it's straight from the horse's mouth himself, you know? He would know better than anyone else and would've told the stories on himself. In all probability, although it's debated of course, Mark was one of the great interpreters of Peter.

When Mark finally wrote his Gospel—again he didn't have in mind that someday his Gospel would be published and then distributed throughout the world—he had one single community in mind. You know where this was? In Rome where the Christians were undergoing a great deal of persecution. In fact Nero was not only persecuting them, he was executing them. This is very important as we bear in mind throughout these readings from Mark that he's trying to address this community undergoing great difficulty in order to encourage them and to remind them that this is the cost of discipleship. The theme of Mark's Gospel is the cross; that Jesus is the one who

suffered, and died, and rose, for our sake and anyone who wants to be His follower must also denied himself and take up their cross and follow Him. That's the underlying theme we'll hear again and again. Even as we will briefly reflect on today.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of all the Gospels—16 chapters. It's the most action filled. It begins right away at the public life of Jesus and takes us all the way to the empty tomb. From beginning to end, there's a sense of urgency. He writes all about these powerful teachings and healings of Christ as if to say, that this is what the Lord is wanting to do in our midst today.

With that as a brief background, we look at today's Gospel. Jesus begins the words—this is not in our passage but I like to bring in His two verses prior to what we read. Jesus says, "Heaven and Earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Isn't that interesting because of what I just said about the Gospel development, and appreciating all that it had to do to preserve this memory and the teaching of Christ? Jesus says, "My words will not pass away." That's how we can trust in the inspiration of these great words and stories we read in the Gospel. Jesus says though, "But as for the day or the hour—referring to the end of time—no one knows, not even the Angels in Heaven, not even the Son of God, but only the Father.

Isn't this interesting, that Jesus insists He does not know the end of the world? So I'd like to know how all these other people know when the end of the world is going to be? Jesus seems to suggest, or implies, that it doesn't really matter when the end is. We should be looking at the end of our life. Does it matter when the end of our life is? Yes, insofar as how we ought to be living right here and now. The often-quoted Stephen Covey—a great author—has said, "Always begin with the end in mind." Every task we do in life, we ought to keep in mind the goal, the mission, the purpose by which we're setting out and that's what's in Jesus' mind as He is facing His death. He's giving in this Gospel passage today, His last instructions to His disciples. This is very important, He's saying, in so many words, keep the end in mind. Keep always before you what really matters.

I happen to think of Cardinal Bernardin, who, in the last few months of his death and dying process, gathered the priests in the Archdiocese together. In that last time with the priests, he prayed with them. In that prayer he said a few words to them. He said, "You know, I look back over my life, and I've come to realize that maybe as much as 20% of what I've spent my life doing, really doesn't matter that much. It's more peripheral and I like to think that as I looked closer to the end my life, I see what matters most." You know the priests who heard him later said, "Cardinal, are you sure it's only 20%?" For most of us, it's a lot more.

What we need to be asking ourselves, if our life was soon to end, what would we let go of and what would we really go for? This is what we need to look at; what matters most. Begin with the end in mind and what is that end but to be one with the Lord? Jesus says: *Wake up everybody. Wake up to what really matters in life. Wake up to what our priorities really ought to be.* He says it in these words to His disciples, "Be constantly on the watch. Stay awake. You do not know when the appointed time will come." As we read the Gospels we recognize the appointed time is right now. In Greek there's two words that are used; time is seen as *chronos*, from which we have the word chronology. It's one thing after another; one day after another. But in the Scriptures

they use *Kairos*, which means appointed or anointed time. Any time, and every time, we experience the Lord, it's very meaningful and purposeful.

This time, right here, is the appointed time. It's our appointment with the Lord and it's to lead us on. Then Jesus tells this brief parable. Again remember, he's talking to an oral society, no one's taking notes. He wants to tell stories because they will remember these stories, as surely, they did. With the stories comes a powerful point, which you can guess. He says, "A man is traveling abroad; leaves home; places his servants in charge; each one has their own task, and he tells them watch with a sharp eye." Obviously you can determine immediately who the master is in this analogy. It's Jesus Himself who soon will be departing and His servants are of course the disciples. Each of us have a certain task, a certain mission we have been given. But we need to stay awake to what our mission is. How easy it is, like Cardinal Bernardin said, to be *preoccupied*, distracted by so many things; and oddly in this season of preparation, more than any. In this season as we prepare for the coming of Christ—and you know in Advent we remember not only the first coming of Christ 2000 years ago, but the second coming of Christ. He comes to us even to this day. How do we prepare for that? We have to wake up to the ways the Lord is with us. We have to be aware of how He is ever present.

Jesus goes on with the parable to say, "You do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether at dusk, at midnight when the cock crows or early dawn. I pause for a moment to highlight those four times. Those are the four typical times in ancient Palestine that were considered the four watches of the night. I would suggest that each of those are loaded with meaning, insofar as Mark recalls those watches of the night—keep in mind the word *watch* of the night—because the disciples are constantly falling asleep during those watches and Jesus is trying to awaken and alert them to the meaning of what will be happening as He anticipates His passion and death; and so it begins. What happens at the dusk during Jesus' Passion? It's the Last Supper when they're gathered together and they don't really know what's happening. They're not fully conscious of what's taking place at the time. Judas even leaves. He leaves his faith; leaves the presence; leaves the table—or as some priest said, he was the first one to leave church early—to go off to betray Jesus.

And then the second watch, midnight. Jesus gathers His disciples together in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. And remember, His last request of them: "Stay awake." Stay awake, and how do we stay awake? Pray with me. Realizing this watchfulness—this vigilance—is a spiritual awakening and awareness. How do we keep that but through prayer that moves us to that place where we recognize the Lord and what the Lord is asking us and doing with us and in us. But the disciples were falling asleep. They kept falling asleep. It's human nature to fall asleep. But realize, there's a whole lot more happening here. What are they asleep to? They're really asleep to everything that's going on in terms of what Jesus is asking, of Jesus' own suffering, of their own responsibility, they're like totally unconscious and seemingly unconcerned about Jesus' great agony, even as we might be. The Lord's always trying to awaken us to each other.

Then the third watch of the night was the cock crow, of course you realize what a loaded image that is in the Gospel for the time when Peter denied Jesus, could not stay awake in his faith, but again Peter denying him, going off into the dark of the night. And again, at early dawn, on Easter Sunday morning, the last watch of the night, when the Apostles were gathered together in that

room locked behind doors of doubt and fear, the women come and tell the disciples Jesus has risen, but they can't believe it. Still their faith is lacking. What we're seeing—and Mark is wonderful because you have to wonder: Why does Mark tell us these very embarrassing details about the disciples? You know it's the tendency for anybody, especially for any country, to want to make their leaders and their founding fathers into bronzed heroes; to make them look like they've never done anything wrong; to make them like we make our Saints, kind of plastic Saints canonized and put up on a high pedestal. Why is it that Mark makes the disciples look so human, so frail, so faulting, except that the instruction and the impression is so helpful to us today? It reflects how we struggle and falter along.

This is why I love the Gospels. They present a realistic view. We are the disciples today, learning what it means to follow Jesus, to take up our cross, but the disciples didn't want to hear this. That's why throughout the whole Gospel they're almost always, as it were, sleepwalking and following Jesus. They're following Him, but it's always at a distance—like during the Passion—and even when they are following, they're really not getting it. They're half awake, half aware, and so it isn't until the Resurrection will come and they're given this light and the dawn brings that light of new faith and new awareness.

Now all of this, of course, applies to Mark's community. Remember, Mark is taking all these events that have happened and he's re-telling them to his community. Why? Because they too are going through the same kind of difficulty. They are in a period of great crisis. Many of them are being called to lay their life down for their faith, and they're scared to death like the disciples. So Mark says, "Remember what Jesus said to His disciples? Stay awake. Be on guard, for surely we don't know if we will be called to death. But we should live for the Lord. You remember what the Lord promised? He would be with us. He would come back for us and lead us to eternal life."

Mark is encouraging them, so today, this Gospel has, I think, special meaning for anyone going through any kind of difficulty. This leads us into the whole purpose of the Advent season. I think that for us too, we could look at these words that Mark gives us, that Jesus first gave to His disciples as a wake-up call for all of us; to remind us what our life is really all about. To remind us that, in this Advent season, a time when we especially prepare for Christ's coming, we realize how quickly Christ, at His Christmas, can come upon us and we could be unprepared. Most of us wouldn't ever want Christmas to come to us if we didn't have all the other preparations. But what about the spiritual preparations?

I like to offer just a suggestion of what might be considered some wake-up exercises for the Advent season. What can help us really be mindful of the reason for the seasons of Advent and Christmas? What will lead us truly closer to the light of Christ where He comes to us? I just offer a few suggestions. First, Thanksgiving Day provides for many of us, a perfect occasion to have some discussion with our family. Maybe, how would it be, if we raise the question: How can we as a family, or friends, celebrate Christmas this year in a special, spiritual way? How can we celebrate Christmas, perhaps, in a less material or commercial way and hopefully a more meaningful way? That's not to say we shouldn't buy gifts for each other. How can we make those gifts more simple and more heartfelt, beautiful gifts? How could we be a present to each other, especially to the relatives we overlook? Maybe we give them more of our time. How can

we offer a gift to the poor? We remember Christ came to be poor. We heard last week in fact, whatever we do to the poor, we do for Christ. How can we as family, at Christmas time, pray together? How about through the Advent season, praying the rosary, reading the Scriptures together? How can we, maybe as family, come to Christmas Mass or service together? What could we do as family to make this year a little more spiritual and meaningful? How about asking that question? How about broaching the subject? That isn't easy, but I just suggest it to our attention.

Secondly, implied in this, is that to get to Christmas takes a few steps via fused strategies. How can we make a special effort this Advent season to pray? To pray individually, or as a family. To spend that time of quiet. You know someone said, "We must prepare the manger." Consider your heart as a manger that must be open and ready; sturdy but soft. That we must build an empty spot in our calendar, in our family, in our schedule to make time for the Lord to come. That we look for the Lord in simple, little ways in which the Lord always comes—even in a stable mind you. The barest, simplest, poorest way. We need to take time to pray this way. Then we realize how Christ is always coming and He speaks like a baby would: softly and subtly, humbly and in little ways He comes to us and cries for our attention.

Perhaps another way we could celebrate ourselves, this Advent season we soon begin, is by taking in hand the Gospel of Mark. Since it's only 16 chapters, could I recommend to your attention, some of you—who would be so willing—to read through the entirety of the Gospel. Have you ever read a whole Gospel all the way through? You know it was never divided into chapters and verses until the Middle Ages. It was meant to be one reading of *Good News*. Mark begins his Gospel: "Here begins the good news." That Mark was the first one to use that word—in Greek it's *euangélion*—from which we have the word *gospel*. Here's good news. Here's good news. Remind you, it's to a people who hear nothing but bad news every day because of the way they are being persecuted and suffering and dying for their faith. He tells them this Good News of Jesus. So maybe if we could read the Gospel, reflect on the Gospel, maybe every day take a moment to do that?

Cardinal Bernardin so inspired me as he began every single day, praying the first hour of the day with the Lord. And in that time, offering himself for the Lord to use him however he wished throughout the day. We may not have an hour, but how about a few minutes? Even maybe a half hour to take with the Lord, with the Gospel at hand?

One final thought. What about being aware of where someone is hurting and suffering? The area is Christ. There is Christ, as we heard last week in the beautiful Gospel. We need to respond; go to those in our own family, among our own relatives and friends and be Christ to them. Extend Christ's kindness to them and Christ will come back to us through them, surely; just some of my thoughts.

I like to end on this suggestion, that we would all just take a minute right now and try to determine—realizing this is just the beginning of our thinking—what one thing could we do this Advent that would lead us, and perhaps hopefully others, closer to Christ? What one thing could we do or try to be in this Advent season that would bring us to the Christmas season of experiencing Christ? Amen.