

## Order of Service for November 29, 2020 - Advent 1

### GATHERING

#### Confession and Forgiveness

P - Blessed be the relational Trinity (†), One God,  
creating, reconciling, liberating.

C - Amen.

P - With hearts anticipating God's incarnation,  
we make preparation by confessing our brokenness:

*A moment for silent reflection*

P - Relational God,

C - Forgive us. We have shied away from the strong themes of Advent. We have emphasized the dualism of dark and light; wrongfully equating darkness with sin, suffering, and evil. We have failed to 'cry out' for the refugee, the enslaved, and the captive. We hesitate to risk our comfort and security for the liberation and freedom of all. We confess that we tame Jesus and his revolutionary view of God's reign. We have interpreted Advent as a time of passive waiting, rather than as a rallying call to work in the Spirit of justice: to advocate for the poor, and bring an end to systemic oppression.

Revolutionize our hearts for relationship and our wills for the birthing of the commonwealth of God, in the expectation of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Amen.

P - We are given the gift of relationship: The midnight sky holds the twinkling stars. The ocean depths support a myriad of luminescent creatures. The shadows cradle hopes and dreams.

In the name of Emmanuel, † God-with-us, your sins are forgiven. Turning from sin, being captive no more, showered with hope, peace, joy, and love, may we be revolutionized to fight for right relationship with all.

C - Amen.

#### Gathering Song - 257, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, verses 1,2,4,6,8

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear

*Refrain*

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel

O come, O wisdom from on high, embracing all things, far and nigh;  
In strength and beauty come and stay; teach us your will and guide our way. *Refrain*

O come, O Branch of Jesse, free, your own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell your people save, and give them victory o'er the grave. *Refrain*

O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer, our spirits by your advent here.  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight. *Refrain*

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. *Refrain*

*(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)*

## **Greeting**

P - The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

C -And also with you.

## **Kyrie**

P - Gracious and loving God, you provide more than we need, promising light in our gloom. Lord, have mercy.

C -Lord, have mercy.

P - Gracious and loving Saviour, you join us in the shadows of our lives, bringing light to help us see. Christ, have mercy.

C -Christ, have mercy.

P - Gracious and loving Spirit, you free our eyes from dimness, shining your light in the world. Lord, have mercy.

C -Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Day**

P - The Lord be with you.

C - And also with you.

P - Let us pray.

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection awaken us to the threatening dangers of our sins, and keep us blameless until the coming of your new day, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C - Amen.

## **WORD**

### **Gospel Reading**

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said to his followers, “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

## Sermon

This is the first Sunday of Advent, the church's New Year's Day. We sing hymns about a change coming, we hear readings about remaining alert, and now we hear Jesus remind us to keep watching. Don't let your guard down! Maintain your readiness! Stay awake!

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that we've been *bombarded* with this same message since March 17th! We've been *staying* alert for the last 8+ months! We've been looking over our shoulders every waking minute.

And to be honest, a lot of us are tired. A lot of us don't want to play this game anymore. A lot of us would rather *not* stay alert. In fact, what we'd *really* like to do is take a well-deserved *nap* for a couple of weeks.

Especially now that the rules have started changing again. We know that our families and friends in Halifax are not able to worship together today. A lot of people in the rest of the *country* are not able to worship together today; not to mention around the world. And it is entirely possible that our *own* schedule may change in the coming days. And as we think about these things again, we can feel the anxiety rising in the pit of our collective stomachs, can't we?

We are in an uncomfortable place, and it's kind of hard to see how this demand that we "Stay awake" is encouraging *at all*, because it simply sounds like one more impossible thing to do when we are already over our heads in "impossible things."

I get it. I really do. It took me while to recover from Dr. Strang's press conference on Tuesday. And I know, from talking with a number of people this week, it took others a while to recover from it, too.

So let's be gentle with each other.

And one way of being gentle with each other is to remember that, when Mark wrote these words down, he was trying to be gentle with his people, too.

Granted it might not sound like it at first blush! But we need to remember that the community to whom he wrote was going through some pretty intense times. The Roman Empire was on a bit of a rampage in that part of the world at that time. Rome had just crushed a revolt by some of the Jewish people in the Holy Land, and as part of that campaign, Roman forces had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem.

But it wasn't just the Jewish people who were feeling the Roman boot. That whole parcel of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea was used as a buffer zone for Rome. It was basically seen *by* Rome as a no-man's land between Rome and the neighbouring Empire. Today we would probably describe the people who lived in that part of the world as Collateral Damage. They were considered expendable for the so-called "greater good" of military security for the Empire.

The church was not, at this time, being specifically picked on. They weren't being persecuted like they would be in later times. But they were part of a society which was feeling a fair amount of stress, was under a lot of pressure, and had a hard time understanding everything that was happening to it.

And it was *that* situation, and *those* nervous people, that Mark was trying to address in his story of Jesus. And the way he does it is really instructive. Before he tells them, and us, to stay alert and keep watch, he tells them, and us, what we are to keep alert and watch *for*. And he does it with one very simple, yet very significant sentence:

*You do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.*

Mark is setting the stage for his readers, and us. He is getting us, in our **current** situation, to hear the story of how God came in the first place.

When Mark says, *In the evening*, he is pointing us to when Jesus will meet with his disciples for their last meal together.

When he says, *at midnight*, he is pointing us ahead to when Jesus will be arrested in the garden, and the disciples will all flee.

When he says, *at cockcrow*, he is getting us ready to hear Peter deny even knowing Jesus.

When he says *at dawn*, he's preparing us for the moment when Jesus will be sentenced to death.

And when Mark says, *he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly*, he's giving us advanced warning of the disciples sleeping in the garden after Jesus specifically tells them to stay awake, and pray, so that they may not fall in the time of trial.

When Mark writes that Jesus tells his disciples to watch, because they do not know if things will happen *in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else you may be asleep*, Mark **is**, in fact, driving us to some of the major touch points in the story of **Jesus' last night**.

Mark is reminding us of **how** Jesus came, so that, in our watching **today**, **we** know how to pay attention; we know what to watch **for**.

We **don't** watch for big headlines. We **don't** expect major, earth-shattering cataclysms to usher in God's new creation. We do not anticipate God coming in power.

Instead, Mark is reminding us to look for God, to **expect** God to come... in weakness. In suffering. In oppression. In injustice. In vulnerability. For Mark, God comes in the **shadows** of life, bringing healing, and wholeness, and peace, **right there**, where it's most needed

*Therefore, we look for the coming of God today:*

- when those who have nothing, find it within themselves to share.
- when people who are anxious, find it within themselves to respond with compassion.
- when those who are in the midst of pandemic, find it within themselves to care for others instead of looking out for their own convenience.
- when those who have suffered for generations from prejudice and racism, find it within themselves to stand up without weapons and fight for equality for all of us.
- when the wealthy and powerful begin to identify their privilege, and embrace the long, slow, **difficult** process of letting go, and listening to other stories, and discovering their own humanity.

And so, in the middle of our pandemic, in the middle of our eighth month of looking over our shoulders, in the middle of being just plain tired of having to watch **everything**, and in this beginning of our latest Advent season, I don't think Mark is trying to scold us into paying attention. I don't think Mark is frantically yelling "Stay awake!" I don't think Mark is threatening us with a divine "Or Else" if we miss the clues.

I think Mark is extending a gracious invitation. I think Mark is inviting us to acknowledge the "stuff" we are going through, which is making our lives so anxious and stressful and tiring. I think Mark is inviting us to recall that it is precisely in the **middle** of

such difficult times, *when* Temples are destroyed, *when* people are considered expendable for some supposed “greater good,” *when* people are cut off from family and friends, *when* things keep changing so frequently that we can’t possibly keep track of it all, *when* we have, in fact, reached the end of our collective rope, that God shows up.

In those shadow times, in *these* shadow times, God comes, not in power, not blinding flashes, not in overwhelming displays, but in the quiet, hidden corners of life, where healing becomes possible, where restoration is experienced, where relationships are rediscovered, where life, in fact, becomes new.

Watch for *that!* And the God of Advent will indeed be with you. And us *all* Amen.

## RESPONSE TO THE WORD

### Hymn of the Day - 244, Rejoice, Rejoice Believers (verses 1 & 4)

Rejoice, rejoice, believers, and let your lights appear;  
the evening is advancing, and darker night is near.  
The bridegroom is arising and soon is drawing nigh.  
Up, pray and watch and wrestle; at midnight comes the cry.

Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear;  
arise, O Sun so longed for, o'er this benighted sphere.  
With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord, to see  
the day of earth's redemption that sets your people free!

*(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)*

### Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the dawning of God’s day, we pray for the world God loves, the church God calls, and all according to their needs.

A - God who comes in weakness, free us from our attachment to power. May we let go of whatever interferes with our dependence on you. God who comes,

C - May we hold to your promise.

A - God who comes in suffering, open us to the pain which others are experiencing, so that, with them, we may proclaim that we are not alone. God who comes,

C - May we hold to your promise.

A - God who comes in oppression and injustice, inspire us by your Spirit to see what is truly happening in this broken world, and then inspire us by your presence to live into a new way of being. God who comes,

C - May we hold to your promise.

A - God who comes in vulnerability, we confess that your church has too often sided with the strong against the weak, with the insider against outcast. As you continue to come to us without strength or fanfare, send us in the same way to the hurting, the hungry and the excluded. God who comes,

C - May we hold to your promise.

A - God who comes in illness, we offer our concern for those who are sick, who work to serve the dying, who care for the forgotten. We especially remember those whom we name before you.

[*Long pause*]

God who comes,

C - May we hold to your promise.

A - God who comes in the shadows, we struggle to trust your presence. Remind us again that, no matter what, we are yours. God who comes,

C - May we hold to your promise.

P - We ask all this in the name of Jesus, our approaching Lord.

C - Amen.

### **Lord's Prayer**

P - And now we pray as Jesus taught us:

C - Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

### **SENDING**

#### **Benediction**

P - May God, for whom nothing is impossible, restore you and bless you.

May Christ, in whom is the dawning of grace, carry you and lead you.

May the Spirit, whose song is gladness,

fill you with energetic peace and determined hope.

C - Amen

#### **Sending Song - 438, My Lord, What a Morning**

*Refrain:*

My Lord, what a morning; my Lord, what a morning;

oh, my Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall.

You will hear the trumpet sound, to wake the nations underground,  
looking to my God's right hand, when the stars begin to fall. *Refrain*

*(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)*

#### **Dismissal**

P - Go in peace. Prepare the way of the Lord.

C - Thanks be to God!

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