

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent “Keeping Watch and Staying Awake”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Ah, the weekend after Thanksgiving. I hope you all had wonderful family gatherings filled with love and free of drama. I had a great Thanksgiving, complete with all of my favorite family recipes for Thanksgiving Dinner. I think I shared with you before it is the responsibility for the guys in the family to handle the mashed potatoes which essentially is the art of smashing a couple of potatoes into several pounds of butter. And the Brussels sprouts were made to my satisfaction. You may recall the recipe starts with a pound of bacon, and then you wave one Brussels sprout over it and then throw it away. And the Turkey was magnificent as always! Our Thanksgiving dinner meals always runs like a liturgy, complete with prayer, lots of food and company, and the men retiring to the man cave afterwards for football which essentially consists of all of us falling asleep on the floor for our annual food coma. Ah, the tryptophan! As I was nodding off into my food coma I recalled the irony of this Sunday’s Gospel reading of Jesus telling his disciples to “stay awake”.

And as I smiled considering this, I also called to mind the culture in which Jesus lived when it would have been unthinkable for all the guys to fall asleep at once. If you lived in a culture where you were occupied by foreign troops who were prejudiced against you, you would always have a few people stay sober and alert so to sound the warning bell. Even shepherds in the fields took turns keeping watch so to protect the sheep from predators and thieves. Most neighborhoods operated the same way. And the art of keeping watch isn’t that archaic when you consider that sea faring vessels, for example, always have a crew awake while at sea. I learned that a common practice is to have four hour shifts twice a day with eight hours in between shifts for sleep or personal time. Having four hour shifts rather than eight hour shifts keeps the crew on duty alert for the unexpected.

I also considered that our society is blessed to have people constantly keeping watch for us, even during the holidays. Our police, fire fighters, emergency medical teams, support services, military and the like, even our grocery workers and such all deserve our thanks. When you compare our society to the society Jesus was speaking to in this Gospel reading, we are really blessed. In Jesus’ society, it was standard practice every day and night to always have someone in the neighborhood you trusted keeping watch. And so, working off of that kind of common practice Jesus’ culture knew about, Jesus tells us today to “keep watch” and “be prepared”. The unexpected happens at times when we don’t expect. That is why, of course, they call these things unexpected. Aren’t you glad to have me around?

For us Catholics, in my humble opinion, Advent couldn't come at a better time. You see, Advent my friends, is a season marked by the need for, you guessed it, keeping watch. We are keeping watch for Christ's second coming at the end of time as we prepare to celebrate our Lord's birth on Christmas morning. The Gospel challenges us to make sure our souls are keeping watch for the Kingdom of God in the same way, each and every day, regardless of what life throws at us. It can be so easy to stay asleep in life, wandering from one task to another. It is good to have the reminder this time of year to wake up spiritually.

You see, as we enter into the holiday season filling up our plates and shopping carts with holiday goodies, Jesus gives us an important perspective this time of year. Jesus says, "You must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." St. Paul also gives us a reminder, "Brothers and Sisters you know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed, the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light". Jesus and St. Paul are challenging us to be prepared, because the end times will arrive when we least expect. At first glance, this message might be cause for additional stress however keeping God first is actually the best remedy for anxiety.

I mention this because who here can find this time of year to be a little stressful? It can be stressful this time of year. There is much that we feel like we need to do, we feel a bit like Martha running around when what we really need to be doing is to be a little bit more like Mary. You see, during the holidays, in the impatient rush to fill our stomachs, buy presents, and watch football, we are reminded to fill our hearts with something more. We are reminded to consider filling our souls with something better, with why this season is important in the first place. What are some practical ways we can reduce the stress of this season?

My friends, I challenge us to take at least five additional minutes each day in prayer during this season of Advent so to not let Christmas catch us by surprise. How many years does it seem like we blink our eyes and Christmas is already here? Christmas will be so much more meaningful for all of us if we just take at least five minutes each day to contemplate the reason for the season. How you spend this prayer time is up to each one of us. We can spend a few minutes with the Gospel according to St. Matthew as we are going to be spending time with this Gospel throughout this new liturgical year. Another option could be lighting a candle each night and perform an examination of conscience and ask for God's wisdom, mercy and love. Sometimes what I like to do is light a candle and listen to music for a little while. There are an infinite number of ways we can spend at least five minutes each day in prayer during this season of Advent to prepare the way for the Lord.

In fact, during the season of Advent, it wouldn't be a bad practice to perform one random act of kindness toward someone each and every day. For me, this is the single most effective way to reduce stress this time year. It could be a kind word to a neighbor or it could be a gift to a local food bank. I like to perform one simple act of kindness each day so that when I go to bed I can say, "Lord, it was a stressful day...but I did this one act of kindness for someone that only you know about." Let me tell you, that kind of prayer makes for a good night's sleep.

You see, the message this Sunday is that the Lord is coming! And this event is more important than anything we could ever hope for so it is time to break out our Advent Wreaths, Advent Calendars and Jesse Trees. Jesus calls us to be prepared because he says he is going to come when we least expect. Therefore, our whole lives are nothing short of an Advent. The word Advent means to keep vigil. Our very lives are a vigil for the Creator of the universe who fashioned us. Our whole lives are a quest for our good and gracious God who alone can satisfy the yearnings of the human heart. Let's focus more on that this year.

And so we have lit our first candle in our church and are challenged to light a candle in our hearts, as the days get darker and darker we are a people who keep watch for the light of the world on the horizon. We keep watch and heed the Lord's invitation: be prepared!