

In the game of baseball, when the opposing team is up, if your pitcher is getting a lot of strikeouts, it is good for the fans, but it's not very good for the other players on your team. The Chiefs are doing so poorly I thought we'd talk about baseball today. When your pitcher is on the mound getting strikeouts, you'd think everyone would be happy. But it's one of the worst things that can happen to your fielders. They get a little lazy. If they aren't handling the ball a couple of times each inning, they just go out to the field, come back to the dugout, back and forth like a routine. They take their turn on defense, but they aren't really playing defense. They start losing attention. Then, when they least expect it, a ball comes their way, and they're asleep. The batter gets a hit where in another game the ball would have been caught. People don't stay alert when life gets routine.

Advent opens with a parable about staying alert. Jesus tells this parable in Mark's gospel just before he is arrested and put on the cross. He is worried. His disciples are in a routine, and they are not alert to what lies ahead. Jesus tells a story of a man who asks his servants to guard his property, and then he goes away on a journey. They don't know when he's coming back. Night travel was very difficult in those days, so you'd think he'd return in daylight, but you really don't know. If he does come back at night, and if he finds everyone asleep, he knows that a) they have disobeyed him while he was away, and b) they have placed the household in danger. It won't go well for them. Jesus tells this parable to the same disciples who will shortly be with him in the garden of Gethsemane; there he's going to pray intently, and he will want them to stay awake and protect him, but they won't. He concludes this parable saying, "Stay alert. Watch." They won't, but he warns them.

Advent brings the same message to us. When our lives fall into a routine, we get careless. People start talking to us, but we don't really listen. We don't hear what is important to them and why they are concerned. People need us to let go of our preferences and let them have theirs, but we're used to having things go our own way. People need us to break our routine and give them a little bit of time, but we're so used to doing things one way, that we never imagine doing them differently. People encourage us to shop for Christmas gifts that make a difference, but we shop for things that no one really needs.

We all fall asleep. The national economy is giving many people a wakeup call; we're managing finances more closely. Sometimes we fall asleep to our relationships. They seem routine, but they all go through a time of transition, a time of testing, when we have to manage them a little more closely. Sometimes we need a wakeup call. That's what Advent is for. We do not know when our finances may be challenged. We do not know when our closest friendships may be strained. We do not know when Jesus will come again. Advent urges us to make each day one that counts. It calls us to live this day in a way that would make us ready for the sudden return of Jesus Christ. Will he find us alert or asleep?