

1st Sunday of Advent

Alarms wail from firetrucks, clocks, cellular devices, police cars, personal cars, baby monitors, security systems, and smoke detectors. You'd think that church would be a nice place to get away from it all. But no. Our gospel for this First Sunday of Advent opens with Jesus shouting an alarm to Peter, James, John and Andrew: "Be watchful! Be alert!" And lest we think his message pertained to only those four of his disciples, today's passage concludes with Jesus shouting, "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'" Jesus imitates an alarm clock today, and he has no snooze button.

The liturgical year we begin today features Sunday gospels drawn from Saint Mark. Although his gospel appears second among the four in the bible, most scholars agree he wrote his first, probably around the year 70, probably in Rome, not too far from the Forum studded with temples to various pagan gods. Mark's gospel is the shortest, only 16 chapters long. Today's passage concludes chapter 13; these are the last words Jesus speaks before the beginning of his Passion. We start this church year with the end of Jesus' teaching. He surely felt the advancing steps of those plotting to take his life. He had little time left, so he wrapped up his preaching career with an alarm: Be watchful! Be alert!

The parable he uses compares his disciples to servants put in charge of the house while the master is away: Each has work to do; a gatekeeper watches for the master's return. Jesus is like the lord of the house in question, about to be "traveling abroad" through his death and resurrection. He will return when no one expects, so he wants his disciples vigilant at their various tasks.

The parable implies something more by its position in Mark's gospel. In the very next verse, the beginning of chapter 14, the plot to arrest Jesus begins. He has to be watchful because the authorities are coming for him. Being alert does not keep bad things away from Jesus; it just makes him ready to receive them.

Three lessons can therefore be learned from this parable. First, be realistic. Just because you are on the watch does not mean surprises won't come. You may follow all the CDC's rules and still catch a virus. You may keep an eye on your child, and the kid will still break a leg. You may watch the GPS and still get lost. Be alert, but be realistic.

Second, use other people. Not everyone in this parable can possibly stay awake at the same time all day long. Somebody has to keep watch at the gate, but others should go to sleep. The salvation of the world depends on Jesus, not on you. Use other people, and get some rest.

Third, eliminate distractions. When it is your turn, when you are on duty, focus on the task at hand. Put down your phone while you drive. Don't drink to excess: it can lead you to actions you will regret. Stay away from internet sites that lead you into sin. They're wrong. They exploit people. You don't know when you will get caught.

We think we don't need any more alarms, but we do. Advent begins with three simple lessons: Be realistic. Use other people. Eliminate distractions. Then you'll be on the watch and alert.