

Keep Watch

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
November 30, 2025
1st Sunday of Advent- Year A
Matthew 24:36-44



Keep Awake! When you hear this, what comes to mind? I bet at least one of you thought, “Keep Awake- then bring on the caffeine!” But that isn’t the way Jesus is inviting us to stay alert and be ready. Jesus doesn’t want us to go through life exhausted from trying to keep awake. The awakesness that Jesus is describing here doesn’t involve channeling our college self to pull an all-nighter but rather a way of being in the world.

Advent is a time of watchfulness, awareness, and waiting. Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “arrival” or “coming” and during Advent, we are waiting to celebrate Jesus coming to us as a baby born on that night long ago and also waiting for Christ’s eventual return. This waiting isn’t a passive waiting where we stay in a safe place until that day comes when Christ comes again. Advent waiting is an active waiting. A waiting where we live intentionally- preparing and growing and watching- until that future day comes.

As always, context is key to shedding light on the passage. As we enter the new church year on this first Sunday of Advent, we don’t find ourselves in Bethlehem but in Jerusalem. The lectionary has us entering Advent with words from Jesus’ final discourse in Matthew’s gospel.

Jesus has just lamented over Jerusalem, foretold of the destruction of the Temple, and is now overlooking the city from the Mount of Olives when the disciples come to him privately. This isn’t a moment where Jesus is speaking to the masses who are following him. This isn’t a teaching moment that Jesus has created. This is a private moment between the disciples and their teacher. The disciples come to sit with Jesus and say, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of you coming and of the end of the age?”

The disciples ask, and in response, Jesus cautions them about others who will falsely claim to be the Messiah, Jesus quotes from the book of Daniel about the coming of the Son of Man, and Jesus shares a lesson about a fig tree that concludes with him saying, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” After all this, Jesus

looks at his disciples and says, “But about that day and hour no one knows.” No one knows, not the angels or even the Son, only the Father.

Jesus is letting them know they are asking the wrong question. The question isn’t *when* the Son of Man will return but *how* you live until that day comes. This passage isn’t about the rapture as the *Left Behind* series suggests. This is a passage where Jesus continues teaching his disciples about faithful living, not fearful living.

As we wait for the Son of Man to return, we are to keep living our lives. We are to keep eating and drinking and living out the ordinary parts of life, but we are to do it in a watchful way. Live your life but live it with you head lifted up paying attention to the world around you. Live it in a way that keeps you alert to the future day when Christ will come again to reconcile all things and alert to Christ’s presence in our lives here and now.

I must confess that I struggled with this text because I struggle with the “Second Coming” language. I believe Christ will come again. I can boldly speak the words of the Nicene Creed saying Christ “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” I believe Christ will come again at an unexpected hour, but for me the language of the “Second Coming” seems to diminish Christ’s presence in our lives each and every day.

We aren’t here on earth just waiting to get into heaven. God created us to participate in God’s work of bringing heaven to earth. The kingdom of God is breaking forth and also not yet, but we help to bring heaven to earth each time we see others as God sees them, each time we treat another as Jesus would treat them, each time we join in God’s reconciling and renewing work on earth.

Let’s go back to that moment on the Mount of Olives where Jesus is overlooking this city he loves and looking into the faces of the disciples who answered his call. After our passage, Jesus continues answering their questions through parables that show what active waiting looks like. One involved ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five took extra oil while the other five did not. So when the bridegroom was delayed, five were prepared and able to joyfully greet him while the other five were not.

The last parable is another familiar one about the judgement of the nations where the Son of Man comes to separate people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Do you remember the criteria used to separate those who will inherit the kingdom? It is whether they have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, taken care of the sick, or visited the imprisoned.

Our passage isn't about being ready for the moment of rapture. Jesus is telling his disciples to live intentionally through countless moments of awareness and watchfulness. We may not know when Christ will return or what it will be like, but we do know Christ. We know of his love and mercy. We know active waiting is living as Jesus lived. We know active waiting is faithful living.

Active waiting is Noah building a boat when there is no forecast of rain. Active waiting is reading your Bible each day learning about how Jesus taught us to live so when challenging situations arise, you can draw upon that knowledge and lean on Christ's presence.

Active waiting is doing the work while paying attention. Active waiting is keeping watch for God at work around you and being alert to how God is calling you to participate. Active waiting is Shorter Chapel creating a food pantry and people donating items to stock it. Active waiting is visiting a member or a friend who lives alone and would appreciate the conversation and care that a visit provides.

Active waiting is going to work and viewing your coworkers as beloved children of God. Active waiting is assuming everyone is doing the best they can even if it doesn't always feel that way.

Active waiting is packing the lunches and planning family meals. Active waiting is going to school being grateful you live in a country and county where education is valued. Active waiting is noticing the classmate sitting alone at lunch or hanging out by themselves during recess and choosing to talk to them and invite them to join you. Active waiting is going about your daily lives with intentionality and attentiveness.

During the WNL Thanksgiving service, I spoke about gratitude as a form of resistance in our culture, and those words were still echoing within me as I turned to this passage. Like gratitude, active waiting is also an act of resistance. In a culture that tells us to look inward and take care of ourselves over caring others, active waiting has us looking outward and paying attention to the world around us.

Active waiting is going about our ordinary lives with intention. It is living our lives faithfully, keeping watch on the needs of our neighbors and the needs of our world. We can't do everything, but we can do something. How is God calling you to active waiting? How is God calling us as a congregation to new ways of active waiting?

We know a little something about waiting as we have been waiting for our next installed pastor, but our waiting most certainly has not been passive. We have already been living into our call to be Advent people as our waiting has been active and filled with faithful living. Faithful living that seeks to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and clothe those with need.

Our active waiting has involved serving breakfast yesterday to the unhoused through the Fish and Loaves Ministry, packing hygiene kits in Wilson Hall for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, sending a mission team to Mountain T.O.P. to repair homes and hand out winter clothing and shoes to those who need them, and supporting the Hard Bargain Association as they work for affordable housing in our community.

In our active waiting, we baptized five beloved children of God promising to teach them about Jesus and God's love for them, we sent our youth to NaCoMe to deepen their faith in community surrounded by the beauty of God's creation, and we continue to offer numerous opportunities for adults to grow together in small groups including Bibles Studies, Sunday Schools, and Growth Groups.

The last verse continues to echo within me, "Therefore you also must be ready." Jesus could have just said, "Be ready!" but chose to add the *you*. This is a personal imperative offered to each disciple gathered around him on the Mount of Olives and to each of us gathering here today.

You must also be ready. You who are busy getting ready for Christmas, you who are working your list and doing the work, you who are eating and drinking and marrying and living, you must also keep watch and be vigilant. You must live in such a way that you are ready.

So, keep watch. Be ready. Say yes to Jesus' invitation to faithful living—living that looks for Christ in each person and seeks to reflect his love and mercy in the ordinary moments of our days. We are called to live faithfully, not to earn God's favor, but in grateful response to the gift of Emmanuel and in joyful hope for Christ's return.

May your Advent be filled with active waiting. May you move through the world with your head lifted, looking outward, paying attention to God at work around you, and discerning how you are called to participate. And through this faithful living, may we be ready for that unexpected day and hour when Christ will come again to make all things new.

May it be so. Amen.