Keep awake… that’s a phrase with new meaning for me, personally, having a 3-month old at home. I’ve done a lot of “keeping awake” here recently… and not by choice. Middle of the night feedings… middle of the night diaper changes… more middle of the night feedings… and then… despite being totally exhausted… when I do sink into my nice, comfy bed… I find I’m wide awake. Every little noise and I’m like, “Is the baby okay?” Or I just can’t turn my brain off… worried about every little thing… //does that cough mean he’s sick… he spit up a lot today… is something wrong with his stomach… maybe I should get up and check his temperature… //and I think about the future… about what kind of person he is going to grow up to be… about what the world will be like… the kind of things he’ll have to face… Keep awake.

 So what keeps you awake at night? Is it the state of the world… our leaders… (political or otherwise)… the next 4AM tweet storm? What about family… kids who never stop being your kids no matter how old they get… heath problems… relationship issues… During the holiday season… are you still trying to figure out how to split up time amongst family… worried that old issues will be dredged up again or new ones will present themselves? What about work problems… feeling unappreciated… or pressure from the higher ups… dealing with obnoxious co-workers? Are you worried about money… how all the bills are getting paid this Christmas season… is the car going to break down… what’s going to break in the house next? What keeps you awake at night?

 I think doctors recommend getting at least like eight hours of sleep a night… and lack of sleep can have negative repercussions on concentration, alertness, productivity… our health in general… and yet… for many that eight hour benchmark is something of a pipe dream… it seems there’s always something more that needs done… a project that needs finished… another activity… something else to worry about. //And today’s gospel reading gives us one more reason to stay awake… one more warning… one more reason to worry… we better keep awake… because if we don't… we might miss Jesus.

 Keep awake… keep alert for Christ’s presence in our midst… that’s the message we hear this morning. It wasn’t that many weeks ago we heard a similar warning in the story about what happened to the bridesmaids when they fell asleep and awoke, and were not ready… and found themselves on the outside looking in. So, the message today is to not fall into the same trap, right?

 We are now in the season of Advent… and that means… ***Christmas is coming***… actually, Advent literally means arrival… so the message we hear in today’s gospel reading is to keep awake… to be alert… to watch out and be prepared for the arrival of Jesus our Christ… and by that, we don't just mean Christmas… we don't just mean the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25th… we don't just mean preparing the cards or the presents or the lights… or the food for the big family gathering… Advent is a season to remind us to be prepared for God in the midst of us… here and now… for God coming to us as the baby in the manger, yes… but also as our savior on the cross… our God who walks with us each and every day. And Christ often comes to us in the moments we least expect… in ways we least expect. So we need to keep awake… we need to keep alert… so as not to miss Christ’s presence in our midst here and now.

 So how do we keep alert for God incarnate… God with us… God among us here and now? Does it really mean we should never sleep… never enjoy a quiet slumber

on a very comfortable bed because we are to be on guard 24/7? I mean that would be impossible… pretty sure you go crazy after only like a few days without sleep. God’s not asking us to go crazy. And yet this whole sleeping thing seems to carry a very negative connotation. Remember even the closest disciples themselves in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the final hours of Jesus’s mortal life cannot stay awake while Jesus prays… they fall asleep… and Jesus lets them know how disappointed he is with them… //not just once but three times he scolds, “Could you not stay awake with me one hour?” So, what are we to do with this theme of “keep awake?” Is this really some kind of scare tactic… because today’s gospel reading sounds more than a little bit scary? Do we really think this text meant to add to our worry… to direct us to live in fear? Spoiler alert: the answer is no.

This morning we are beginning a new church year, with Advent being the first season of our liturgical cycle. As we begin this Advent season, as we light one candle this morning for the coming Messiah, we are reminded of the

Advent wreath’s symbolism that everything will come full circle. And we begin using the Gospel of Mark as our gospel anchor throughout most of 2018… and as this new church year begins and we switch to the gospel of Mark… we start not at the beginning of our Gospel story, but at the end. We do not begin with chapter one on this first Sunday in December… this first Sunday of Advent… this first Sunday in the church year… that’s next week… this week we begin with a passage from chapter 13… And why is that? Because we today are reminded of the outcome of our story… We are reminded that it is because of the ending that we can begin to anticipate an arrival. We know that the birth we will celebrate in a couple of weeks is going to mean the empty tomb… a message of love, forgiveness… and hope for eternal life with God. Today… we are given a glimpse of the end of the story, as we await this new birth.

So… As Christians, we do not hear this text with fear. It is not about traumatizing us into an unauthentic faith based on being scared of what happens if we don’t.

Instead, as Christians… as people who understand that we are saved by God’s grace and God’s grace alone… we have the comfort and the confidence of seeing Christ’s coming not with fear and foreboding… but with joy and eagerness. This morning’s gospel is not intended to make us fearful believers… but joyful ones… joyful believers… joyfully living out our call to be active, not passive, followers of Christ… to be companion, not complacent, people of God.

 So we hear today’s gospel message to “keep awake,” and we strive to be alive, alert, and awake in Christ… /we know we don’t have to be afraid… Because we have a glimpse of the end of our story, and our story ends in Christ.