Keep Awake

November 27, 2005 (1st Sunday of Advent, Year B)

Isaiah 64:1-9a Psalm 80 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 Mark 13:24-37

"And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Today we begin the season of Advent. We begin it in Jerusalem shortly before the Passover. It does not begin with a glorious vision of the Incarnation, with angelic annunciation, or with a group of astrologers frowning at the horizon. It begins with a parable and with an injunction. "Watch. Keep awake." These are the concluding words of a discourse on the end times that occupies the entire thirteenth chapter of Mark. It's the last chapter that Mark devotes to Jesus' teaching. The rest of the book is Passion narrative. If, like me, you grew up in a church tradition that placed no particular emphasis on Advent you may find this, as I do, a curious and uncomfortable place for us to begin. Or perhaps it's simply uncomfortable because we encounter it with stomachs full of Thanksgiving turkey and minds filled with Christmas shopping lists.

When I'm not quite sure what to make out of a passage I read the surround – in this case, the entire thirteenth chapter and the end of the twelfth. And when I did this there were a few things that jumped out at me. The first is the action that concludes chapter twelve, the second is the observation that begins chapter thirteen, and the third is the charge to stay alert that concludes the chapter. So let's wind the clock back a few hours.

Jesus is at the temple. He is not in the outer court where teachers hold forth and debates occur. He's not teaching. He is in the so-called women's court. That's the first of the three inner courts, the holiest place in the temple to which women are admitted. And this court is the location of the chests into which worshippers drop their gifts. And this is not where you paid for sacrifices. It is a gift over and beyond whatever you have paid for an atoning sacrifice. The gifts that went into these chests were specifically designated to support the expenses of holding services. And Mark says, "Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything– all she had to live on."

Think about that. The temple is crowded. It's Passover week. There are devout Jews here from all over the Roman Empire. And in the midst of this bustle a poor widow quietly drops two small coins into the accumulating pile of treasure. When the priests total the offering at the end of the day this tiny offering isn't even going to be noticed. It doesn't drive the big red thermometer up to a hundred percent; it doesn't put a name on a pew or a meeting room; it doesn't even buy much incense. But Jesus not only notices. He calls the disciples over and points her out. And while scholars disagree over the significance of this it seems to me that the very act of pointing her out says, in effect, of all of the things we've seen here in the temple today that's the one I want you to remember.

And then, in the very next verse, the scene changes. The disciples have left the inner court and they're on their way out of the temple. As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings." This is the only gospel in which we get this piece of dialogue.

My first reaction to it was which disciple was the country bumpkin. And after I noticed the juxtaposition with the story of the destitute widow I wondered if this was another case of the disciples just not getting it. But first and foremost I couldn't figure out why on earth he commented on the size of the stones. But after I read a little bit about Herod's temple I could understand why the disciple commented on

the stones. Herod the Great started building the temple in 19BC. This was not an act of devotion. It was a political statement to Rome and it was an attempt to solidify what backing he might get from a people who more or less considered him to have usurped the throne. It took ten years to build the temple and to preserve its sanctity in the eyes of the people Herod had 1,000 priests trained as masons to do the building. But the temple was only one part of a complex that included civic buildings, quarters for the Roman soldiers, a residence for the pro-consul, and so on.

So, at the time of the story, the temple has been there for thirty or forty years, but there's still construction going on. Wasn't finished until 64 AD. And it lasted for all of six years. The Romans destroyed it in 70 AD. So it's quite possible that as they're leaving the temple area a work gang is pushing some of these very large stone blocks toward the construction site. And it was impressive. Sort of like going to visit the National Cathedral. So it's not really a dumb remark. And Jesus doesn't treat it as a dumb remark. But it's certainly safe to guess that his response was totally unexpected. "Don't be too impressed. It's all coming down anyway." My own suspicion is that Jesus thought that the widow in the temple was of far more importance than this building project. But in our scheme of things a widow is only a widow and his response suggests that the entire power structure is about to fall apart. At least that's how the disciples heard it and that gets their attention.

We're sure of that because once they reach the Mount of Olives Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask him privately what this means. When will it happen? How will we know that it's about to happen? And Jesus paints for them a vision of conflict, of war, of persecution, of natural disasters, of false prophets, and of families bitterly divided. And we have no way of knowing from the text but I have a suspicion that the reaction of the disciples might be similar to our own. Sounds like the six o'clock news to me. Because Jesus then goes on to paint a more personal picture for them of the cost of their discipleship. And this, I would guess is a shock. After all, Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He has cleansed the temple. He has debated with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and they've come up short. The disciples at this point have got a pretty rosy view of the future. Who gets to sit on his left and who gets to sit on his right? We're going to make some changes around here. And Jesus says, "You will be betrayed, you will be brought to trial, you will be hated by all because of my name." Talk about a let down.

Fortunately the news is not all bad. You don't know the day or the hour when the world as you know it is going to come crashing down on you. Only God knows the days and the hours and because God knows you don't have to spend a lot of time worrying and speculating about the future. Not about the future of the world, not about the future of the country, not about the future of your family, not about your own future. It's in God's hands.

But while we are advised not to worry we are also told not to get complacent. Jesus ends this discourse about the end times with the parable that we heard earlier. A man is going away. He leaves his house and puts the servants in charge, giving each servant an assigned task, and tells the doorkeeper to keep watch. And no one knows when he will return. Act accordingly. And that's the end of the teaching.

So here we are, back at the beginning, waiting for the master of the house to return. Getting ready to share again the story of where he came from and what it might possibly mean to us. And all the while doing our best not to lose sight of the central question. What does it mean for us to be awake? When we find ourselves surrounded by conflict, death and disaster do we give in to despair or do we continue to do the work that has been given us to do? When our government offers to build the temple of security or the advertisers offer us the temple of ease that we so richly deserve do we ask what those visions really mean and what they're likely to cost? When it comes time for us to offer our gifts, do we cast our mite into the treasury or do we toss in something out of our wealth?

You know it might be an interesting exercise for each of us to go home, pull out a sheet of

paper, and write down, just for our own benefit, what it means for us to be awake. I made up a short list for myself. To pay attention. To look beyond the surface. To question assumptions, including my own. To act out of conviction. To remember that there are certainly ways in which I just don't get it. Your list will no doubt be different. But I really hope that you make one.

"And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."