

NIGHT WATCH
2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONS | WEEK 4
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Watching



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19TH | MATTHEW 25:1-13

We don't have to honor Advent. The Advent police will not come after us if we don't wait until December 25 to hold our Christmas parties, give and receive presents or sing our favorite carols. Our consumeristic culture supports an early start with Christmas arriving on store shelves before Thanksgiving. Waiting loses worth in an age of instant gratification. But even as the night reminds us of our need for rest, some must keep watch: emergency services, hospital staff, chaplains, firefighters, police officers. Not everything or everyone can stop when the sun goes down. Someone must wait for those who need help during the night.

For those of us who don't work an on-call job, the watchfulness of 27 days of Advent can feel like too much to ask. The bridegroom in Matthew's parable is delayed. We all get drowsy. Why can't we just check out and call it a night? Do we need Advent calendars and ominous hymns in minor keys? Wouldn't a good night's sleep serve us better than staying up late to welcome the bridegroom — who may not even show up? Who knows the plans he's made?

But giving up on the bridegroom also means giving up on the promise and hope of our faith. Matthew's

parable of the maidens and their lamps reminds us of the wisdom earned during the night watch. When we anticipate and celebrate what is to come by preparing ourselves with the spiritual supplies to wait for the bridegroom, we can more clearly see what is not yet here. If we indulge ourselves with early gratification, we will not know what it is like to long for a new reality.

Do you need a little prod?

Do you need a little darkness to get you going?

Mary Oliver wrote these words in her poem "The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac" after surviving a cancer diagnosis ("Blue Horses," 2014). Oliver could be described as the patron saint of watchfulness, urging us to record and remember every detail of life. The darker episodes of our days — cancer scares, COVID-19 pandemics, racial injustices, ugly divisiveness and political power grabs — reveal truths we cannot and should not ignore. The bridegroom has not yet arrived and we are left wanting. We are hungry for health and healing, for justice, for goodness, for truth and beauty.

We lean into life, expectant and waiting, straining our ears for the midnight shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." If we do not pay close attention, if we do not let darkness prod us to keep our oil stocked and our lamps trimmed, we will miss this moment. We will overlook this celebration of all-that-is turning into all-that-should-be. Advent positions us to receive this good news. While this season calls us to rest, it also calls us to anticipation. It encourages us to take our turn on the night watch, praying fervently, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

Come, Lord Jesus. Forgive us. Heal us. Break into our darkness with the light of your love and justice. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20TH | 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Should we be scared when Paul uses the thief as a metaphor for the day of the Lord? Fear motivates us to prepare for burglary or break-ins. But Paul's words urge the Thessalonians to stay awake and sober so their faith, love and hope won't be stolen by spiritual apathy or sleep-inducing comforts. We must be alert to honestly assess our present reality in the light of God's kingdom to come. This Advent, let us spiritually prepare for Christ's coming like we'd prepare for the night thief. Let us be awake to the ways Christ might break in.

Merciful God, let us not grow comfortable with a world that is not in tune with your love and justice. Let us not slip into an easy apathy that disregards your call. Let us be ever watchful this Advent for the ways you break into our current reality to reveal Christ's beloved community to come. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21ST | LUKE 6:12-16

When it comes time for Jesus to choose twelve disciples, he steps away from his ministry, finds a quiet place on a mountain and spends the night in prayer. In this way, Jesus models an attentiveness and intentionality about the work of discerning God's will and making faithful decisions. Our days are full of busy distractions. Sometimes the only way we can hear God's still small voice is to spend the night in prayer. What decisions do you need to make this Advent? What do you need to attend to that your busy day keeps you from? Where would God's Spirit lead you if you set aside time tonight for prayer and discernment?

Keep us vigilant, Holy God, for the ways you are present to us, helping us discern and decide the faithful path. Open us to the wisdom we can glean from you when we stay awake, watch and pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22ND | MARK 14:32-42

"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." This is a painful passage to read. Jesus rarely, if ever, asks for help, shows vulnerability or reflects his human need. But here he does. And the disciples fail him. All he asks is that they stay awake with him in the dark hours before his arrest. He doesn't want to be alone. But sleep is the enemy of their faithfulness.

Christmas is days away now. Jesus will be born small, fragile and vulnerable. Through these final days of Advent, let us ask ourselves, "What does Jesus need from us? From me? What can we do tonight to prepare ourselves to faithfully respond when Jesus calls?"

Merciful God, save us from ourselves and the weakness of our flesh. Help us stay awake and alert in these final days of Advent so we can be ready to attend to Christ upon his birth. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23RD | LUKE 21:25-36

The sun, moon and stars give us signs of the coming of the Son of Man. We should not fear these apocalyptic visions, because Jesus brings the gift of redemption. God saves the world through Jesus. God saves us through Jesus. And we need divine intervention. Our problems are overwhelming and complex. Our planet suffers from our abuse and neglect. Whole populations are impoverished while a few live in luxury. Christ is coming to subvert these narratives of abuse, misuse, greed and neglect

to free us to live as God's beloved community. This Advent, we stand ready, our eyes turned to the night sky for signs of this coming Savior.

Come, Savior Jesus, come. We await you with joyful anticipation of the redemption and salvation you offer us. We welcome the signs of your arrival in the night sky and look forward, with hope, to your intervention in our lives and our world. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24TH, CHRISTMAS EVE

ISAIAH 9:2-7

Note the present perfect verb tense in this text. The light has shined. You have multiplied, have increased, have broken the rod of the oppressor. These present perfect verbs show actions that began in the past and continued to the present. The prophets often share their visions of the future in this verb tense, implying their prophecies are as good as done. We cherish these words of hope here on Christmas Eve when our night watch culminates in the birth of the Christ child, the Light of the World. Tonight, we hold each other in the darkness and sing hymns of joy. This is what we have awaited, where our Advent devotional journey has led. Hope has risen.

God of the sun and moon and stars, God of the prophets and angels who announce your good news of great joy, we thank you for this Advent journey and the hope we feel tonight. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25TH, CHRISTMAS DAY

REVELATION 22:1-5

On this Christmas day our world holds the newly born Christ child. This is a beautiful moment in the church year to reflect on the culminating vision of Revelation: abundant life, clean flowing rivers, trees full of fruit, healing and wholeness for people and nations. In this redemptive vision of hope and the grandeur of God, there is no more night because God becomes the source of all light.

Through these Advent devotions, we have seen and observed God at work in the dark, marveled at the beauty of creation lit by moon and stars and rested from the day's labor. We have moved through this season as watchful disciples, keeping vigil for the One promised to arrive like a thief in the night. Today, we give thanks for the fulfillment of this faithful journey, even as we continue to pray.

Come, Lord Jesus. Be our source of light by day and by night. Amen.