

The Rev. Cornel Barnett, D.Min.
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
November 27, 2011

1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
Homily
"Awake and Watchful"

Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus* which means "coming." The Latin *adventus* is the translation of the Greek word *parousia* which is the consummation of history in the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the age.

The biblical texts for Advent place the reader before his birth, before the birth of his ministry at the age of 30, and before the end of the age. Readings at these times encourage Christians to be prepared, awake and watchful.

Today, the biblical lesson makes reference to Jesus' coming at the end of the age. It speaks of a time of suffering which can be any time in our troubled world and it speaks of Jesus' return in the clouds to gather his elect.

The intention of the imagery is to help us to be like Jesus at all times. We are recognized by our words and deeds. This simply means that we need to be about God's good work of compassion, love, peace and justice. Like other parts of scripture it's a devise to keep us engaged as spirit-filled beings. That's the purpose of our faith.

No one knows when the end will come so it is best to "be on the watch" and to "keep awake" at all times.

When I did basic training for the commandoes in South Africa – the equivalent of the National Guard here in the US – I was asked to guard an abandoned house in the countryside for about six hours in the dead of night. I was by myself in uniform with a rifle and bayonet. If I heard someone I would say: "Halt, who goes there?" I guess if there was no answer I would carefully investigate and shoot if necessary.

I was about 19 years old and in spite of my training I was scared and lonely. I expected "terrorists" to jump out the bush and attack me and take the house.

Animal and insect sounds heightened the tension. I sat on the front stairs of the house and walked around with a flashlight. I was super vigilant – super awake and watchful. Fortunately, the night passed without incident and I was duly relieved by my replacement.

The same wakefulness and watchfulness is expected of us in our lives as Christians. Our lives and the lives of others depend on it.

We might find ourselves in dark places and feel overcome with forces of the night. We might struggle with negative thoughts in our times of loneliness. In a dream this week there appeared a person who still seems to bother me after 30 years. I woke with a cramp in my right leg. We might feel the impending attacks by unknown forces. There's a whole bunch of things that could drag us down and divert us from a vital relationship with God.

At times like this I recall and incorporate the benediction: "Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous and strong; let all that you do be done in love." This formula can help us keep on track and be awake when Jesus comes to lead us into greater fulfillment of our faith.

One final word: We don't travel alone. We have each other to help and support us along the way. That's why we have the church.

My son David and I flew from San Francisco to Johannesburg, South Africa, when he was a junior in high school. We arrived jet-lagged in the morning and we rented a car and headed to mountain resort 200 miles away.

In a long stretch about 30 miles from the resort I fell asleep at the wheel. I learned I was asleep when David yelled "Dad!" and grabbed the wheel and steered the car back on the road.

We might fall asleep at crucial times in our lives and when we do we know there are those around us who will help if they know our situation.

More than anything, we rely on God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to support us along the way. All it takes to be awake and watchful is a daily or hourly or minute-by-minute consciousness of God in our lives and we do this by praying at all times; meditating at chosen times; and in advocacy and action for God's peaceable realm whenever the occasion calls. Amen.