

"Stay Awake!"
Mark 13:24-37

November 22,2015

Last Sunday of the Church Year

Imagine having an important appointment scheduled for some afternoon in the next week or two. You're going to see a loved one, interview for a new job, or meet with a lawyer to discuss a large inheritance you are to receive – something good like that. As the day gets closer, you start to get less and less sleep. You're overworked and have no time for sleep. Soon you are exhausted. You try to stay awake by grabbing something sweet to eat (like cookies) or something sweet to drink (like pop). You get that quick boost of energy and feel a little more awake. But the "sugar high" doesn't last. Soon you crash and you feel even more tired. On the day of your appointment, you need just a little rest so you sit back in the recliner to "rest your eyes". You immediately fall asleep, sleep through your appointment time, and miss out on the benefits of that appointment.

You should have stayed awake. That's obvious. But the combination of not enough rest and too many artificial and temporary stimulants, which eventually worked against you, did you in and you fell asleep.

Imagine the same scenario but this time you don't know the time or date for the appointment. That's the situation we have in our Gospel reading for today, the Last Sunday of the Church. Jesus compares His return on the Last Day to a man going away on a long journey and leaving his servants in charge of his things. They are to care for their master's things while eagerly awaiting his return. Since they don't know when their master will return, they are to stay awake and be ready at all times so he doesn't catch them asleep and unprepared for his return.

The return of our Lord Jesus Christ is the most important appointment any of us has, but we don't know when it will be. Jesus says, "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Because of that, Jesus says - three times in our text - , "Stay awake." What does this mean? As we prayed in the Collect: that "we may persevere in both faith and holiness of living."

As everyone knows, everyone is extremely busy these days. What causes us to fall asleep, spiritually speaking, and so fail in faith and holy living? It's not just the busy-ness, but how we react to it. Often we react to pressure and stress the same way we react to physical exhaustion. We go to the "sweets" of this life – the things which stimulate us and keep us going – with the hope that they will help us stay awake. It could be our work, our school activities, our hobbies, our or our children's sports, our friends, our family, volunteer activities, and the list could go on and on. Like cookies and pop, these things are not necessarily bad, but their effect on us is only temporary. They make life enjoyable and meaningful for awhile, but they often take our attention away from Jesus' return and weaken our faith and our holy living.

We also fail to get enough spiritual rest. Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29) As rest for our bodies is crucial in order to stay awake physically, so rest for our souls is crucial for us to stay awake spiritually. Jesus offers us that rest for our souls, but we are often too busy to receive it or too busy concentrating on the "sweets" of this life to keep us going. It's no wonder that we find ourselves spiritually exhausted, in danger of falling asleep, and not being ready for our Lord's return.

We need rest and here is where you find it. Many people think attending Divine Service is an activity they "have" to do in order to fulfill some religious requirement or to make God happy. Thus, it becomes one more thing we have to put on our crowded weekly calendar to wear us out even more. But that's not God's intention. The worship day for ancient Israel was called Sabbath which means "rest". The Old Testament people of God were to get rest for their bodies by abstaining from work and rest for their souls by assembling together to hear the Word of God.

It is even more true for us as New Testament people of God. Many people consider worship to be the work of the people of God. But Jesus has already done all the work on our behalf and for our benefit. Everything required of us by God in His Law which we have failed to do has been done for us by Jesus. Every penalty for every evil we've ever done and for every good we've failed to do

was given for us to Jesus on the cross. Divine Service is not a time for us to serve God or attempt to gain His favor. Divine Service is a time for us rest and allow God to serve us with His gifts.

Jesus is present among us here in this place and at this time, giving us His gifts, and providing rest for our souls. For our guilt, He gives us forgiveness. And He does so most lavishly. He gives you forgiveness in the Absolution, in the Sermon, and in the Lord's Supper – wherever and whenever His promise is spoken, preached, or placed in our mouths. For our anxiety and worry, He gives us His peace and comfort through His Word sung in the liturgy and in the hymns. For our weakness and our doubt, He builds us up in our most holy faith by the reading of His Word. For our uncertainty and fear about the future, He gives us hope and anticipation by providing for us a foretaste of the feast to come in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and by pronouncing His blessing on us as we leave Divine Service.

As we leave here every week, fully rested and refreshed, we must be cautious that we don't wear ourselves out with the things of this world, lest we fall asleep spiritually. Spiritual sleep is like physical sleep. It sneaks up on you. Many of us have had the experience where we sat down to watch a television program that we really wanted to see, but the next thing you know, you are waking up, the program is over, the television is off, and everyone else has gone to bed. You don't remember falling asleep and you didn't know you were sleeping.

The same is true about spiritual sleep. No one intends to fall asleep spiritually. No one intends to be baptized, confirmed, or join a church and say, "I think I'll fall away from the faith." No one says, "I love Jesus but I intend to live contrary to His will." Yet many are falling asleep as they fall away from the faith and live contrary to the will of God. They will awake on the Last Day, not even knowing that they were asleep.

What do we do? Staying awake as we wait for our Lord to return does not mean we live in a panic about the "end times" with fear and worry keeping us awake. A legendary quote from Martin Luther says, "If I knew tomorrow was the end of the world, I would still plant my apple tree." In other

words, live in your vocation as you always do - without fear or panic – trusting in the Lord and leading holy lives of service to one another.

Get plenty of rest for your souls that you might stay awake. Be at rest in the Lord's House as He serves you with His gifts from His Word in the liturgy, the hymns, the lessons, the sermon, the prayers, and the Lord's Supper. Through these you receive forgiveness, peace, joy, and hope to face each day and especially the last day.

Limit and control your intake of the "sweets" of the world – those things which seem to perk us up and keep us going. The things of this world – like sugar – pep us up temporarily but, when we crash, end up making us more tired than we were before. With an ample supply of spiritual rest, we can enjoy the "sweets" of this world which are not sinful. As long as they do not prevent us from gaining rest for our souls or are used as a substitution for true rest for our souls, they can be enjoyed without guilt or regret.

All this talk about the Last Day and the end of the world may seem like frightening talk to many people. For us Christians who are eagerly awaiting the return of our Lord and Savior and the final fulfillment of our salvation (as we will sing in our closing hymn), it is the most exciting thing there is. It is not something we want to fall asleep on through failing faith or unholy living and thus be unprepared for His coming. It is something we want to be wide awake for through the regular reception of His gifts which give us rest. Therefore, to quote Jesus Himself, "And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!" Amen.