

Sermon for 27 November 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

First Sunday of Advent

Scriptures: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalter: UMH 845, Psalm 122 (*Response 1*) ; Romans 13:11-14;

Matthew 24:36-44

***“Starting over”***

The Bible commentary for this first year of the three-year cycle we’re starting today reminds us that reading scripture aloud is in itself an act of worship. We’re sincerely grateful for those who do that. We may not get around to each of the four readings in our discussion every Sunday, but just hearing them here, together, has its effect.

Same goes for starting a new cycle of scriptures: Starting over is what we do. Just like the plants and animals, and the stars and even the rocks and atoms, we go so far, and then we repeat.

Advent rubs our nose in that. “You think things are falling apart? Wait awhile...” “You’re in love? This, too, shall pass.” It’s a short season ... just four weeks ... but Advent packs a wallop.

Take church attendance. I know I’m preaching to regulars here ... but what if we really admit this is as good as it gets. Shopping around for some place we like isn’t the point. Working with the Holy Spirit and THESE people is the point. That means starting over, again and again.

What about United Methodist Women? Did you know they’ve even changed their name? When I was growing up, it was the Women’s Society of Christian Service. Anyone know what it’s called now? And when I tried to order new Prayer Calendars last week, their phone didn’t answer, and neither the 2022 edition nor the website gave the price for copies and shipping... and when I tried to call Grace Church, I discovered they haven’t had a woman’s society chapter for years. Someone else said the world-wide membership used to be over a million; now it’s down to 500,000. That’s catastrophic, don’t you think?

Yet here’s Jesus insisting we should keep awake. He uses a term the Hebrew scripture often employs for the final day: “The coming of the Son of Man.” He doesn’t say it isn’t coming. He doesn’t know when. No one but God knows.

So we’re confronted with real truth. I asked my mother what it was like to get married. She said, “Well, for awhile ... maybe six weeks ... you’re just kind of dreaming .... And then you start waking up, and life goes on...” or something to that effect.

And Jesus says, “Keep awake.” Implying, as I get it, that you don’t want to miss out. Every moment is an education. Every time has a point. You need all the information you can get.

Are you learning something every day?

I argued with a friend last week. She was insisting I should say, "I observe that I'm doing this or that;" not, "I can't" ... or "I always." I told her I was just being honest. She answered, "You can change."

All week I've been observing ...and after a couple of days, I've found myself saying, "That's not what I want to do ... Try this instead!"

It's a strange game .... this faith business. How much do you get to say, "Lord, help me!" and how much do you need to say, "Dan, don't do that! Try this instead!"?

Is the Lord in this or not? What's it mean to keep awake?

What's it mean to start over?

Wait and see.

Nope. Keep awake.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.