

Watch!

SUNDAY

Step 1. Welcome the Stranger Called Silence

Settle into your retreat space and sit in silence for a minute or two.

Step 2. Discover Your Story Within the Word

As you make the sign of the cross, pray:

O God, unshelter my heart that I may hear and know your holy Word.

Read the gospel passage in silence or aloud.

Mark 13:33–37

Jesus said to his disciples: “Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

Spend another minute or two in silent reflection.

Step 3. Connect to the Waiting World: Watch!

I fear the nighttime darkness. As the sun sets on downtown Portland, I grow more restless and uncertain. I hear the piercing sirens of ambulances and fire trucks storm the dusk. I wonder who in our neighborhood overdosed on heroin or started a barroom fight. I hear shouts on the street corners as darkness covers the tall buildings, and I realize our local drug dealers are keeping the night watch. I hear cigarette-induced coughing and occasional laughter under my bedroom window and recognize that our friends are staking out a place to sleep in front of our church entrance. I breathe deeply as daylight fades, praying no one will be raped during the night as friends sleep tightly against the church building.

I feel the darkness of night in my own body. My heart is anxious because I heard that one of our friends in a local single-room-occupancy hotel is off his medication. I pray he will not jump out his fifth-story window as his long-time friend did last weekend. My breathing stops as I hear screeches from oversized car tires rumbling to an incomplete stop at the traffic light and know that drug violence on our street corner is close behind. With one eye open, I sleep—just waiting for the sound of gunshot outside my window.

As a gatekeeper of the night, I beg God to cover our friends curled up on the concrete in the cold rain. I pray that our elderly neighbors will not roam the night streets looking for their lost childhoods. I get on my knees to make sure God will not forget people suffering from mental distress and illness because so few people care for them in the daylight. I am a gatekeeper who still cries out at night because so many people feel they do not belong to society or feel welcomed into their families of origin. So many people feel alone and believe they are not sheltered among the healing rays of Christ's love and protection.

It is in my neighborhood darkness that I hear Jesus telling his disciples to be watchful and alert. This darkness is the place where I happen to live; and the cold, bitter night is long and treacherous. I am one of the servants left in charge, and I know I cannot manage all of these situations myself. I cannot change people's minds about feeling lost and abandoned. I cannot control the night sky, nor can I stop the reckless behavior of manic people who cannot afford their medications. As a faithful servant, I must turn to the promise

that Christ will remain with us until the end of time. Christ's love breaks into our human loss, tragedy, and sin—into my own feelings of abandonment and uncertainty.

This is the place where Advent begins. This is the real life of all believers who know that darkness is replaced with the light of Christ. I fear the darkness, but I am not alone. People from every walk of life share this nighttime fear. I fear for the young runaway teen outside, covered up with rain-soaked blankets—while a young mother in another city sleeps restlessly, listening to her sick infant girl wrapped in new blankets in a bedroom down the hall. I fear the old man covered with vomit and passed out on the sidewalk—while a doctor serving the suburbs fears for the heart-attack victim who just arrived on the gurney from her seventieth birthday party. An elderly wife sleeps in fear as she cares for her husband with Alzheimer's. A middle-aged widower stays awake all night reminiscing and grieving a tragic loss. A young student pulls another all-nighter because he works two jobs to get through junior college while financially supporting his siblings.

We are all watchers of the gate. We are all waiting for God. The sacred season of Advent begins with the call and words of Christ to make us all ready for the master's return. These urgent words sting our consciences and call us to live with intention and purpose. Christ calls us back to a deeper faith amidst our own responsibilities in life—the people, events, situations, and relationships. These words of Christ unmask our hearts and set our priorities anew. At the beginning of Advent this challenge of Christ offers us a new way of seeing our faith and trusting in the power of God's love, even if life is so incredibly difficult.

My fear does not relent in the dawn. When the long night is over and daylight breaks, the suffering in people's lives continues to reveal itself. People need lasting health care, and they search from one agency to another for short-term remedies. They are sick from long-term diseases of the street—gangrene, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Filled with loneliness, isolation, and worry that no medication can ease or cure, people roam the streets. I watch not only during the long, cold winter nights of December, but also in its short days filled with prejudice, gang violence, and chronic illness. This is the Advent message of watching for Christ's appearance, waiting for life to heal itself in the miracles of God's love and faithfulness.

This new liturgical season begins with us hovering among the shadows of worry, fear, and uncertainty, even though God is present, active, and loving in the world. As believers in the light of Christ, fear of the dark is the common situation in which deep and abiding faith is born in every life, in every neighborhood, in every generation, time, and place. Once again I muster the courage to rouse my nighttime vision of hope and watch diligently amidst people's suffering for the Lord's coming.

Step 4. Respond to the Cry of the Prophets

Christ calls us to watch for the master's return. We are to be ready, alert, and vigilant. This watchfulness, this new awareness of life and faith demands much of us who follow Christ. Advent begins with an urgent command that cannot be ignored. As we look more deeply, we must commit to real effort and prayer to ascertain what this seemingly simple word—*watch*—means for the particulars of our lives.

This year the Gospel of Mark calls forth the fidelity of the gatekeeper, the one who is responsible for keeping intruders away from the property. The gatekeeper helps maintain the safety of other people, and as we listen to the gospel, we are being urged to a new watchfulness in every aspect of our lives. We begin by reflecting on our relationships with the people whom we love.

We will find a deeper reliance on God if we begin to strengthen our prayer for people who depend on us. Whom are we being asked to watch more carefully during this season of Advent? What does it mean for us to watch our children, their talents, ideas, and concerns? How can we strengthen bonds with our aging parents or an ill relative by becoming more vigilant about their daily needs, their health care, or inability to pay for long-term support? How do we watch people with love and gratitude, and not with judgment or harsh words? Christ is calling us to continue watching our relationships with care. He urges us to deepen the bonds of love in our world and to honor those who have been entrusted to our care.

1. Christ is calling me to a deeper trust so that I

2. As Advent begins, I know I must examine my relationships so that

3. Today, I am being called to “watch”

Action: Today I will be quiet and reflect on my important relationships.

Step 5. Prayer: Writing Your Way to New Birth

Take a minute or two to look back at what you have written. Then compose a short prayer offering whatever is in your heart to God. Write it in the space below or in the quiet of your heart and mind.

MONDAY

Step 1. Welcome the Stranger Called Silence

Settle into your retreat space and sit in silence for a minute or two.

Step 2. Discover Your Story Within the Word

As you make the sign of the cross, pray:

○ God, unshelter my heart that I may hear and know your holy Word.

Read the Sunday gospel passage (p. 5) in silence or aloud.

Then spend another minute or two in silent reflection on the reading.

For what will you watch today?

Step 3. Connect to the Waiting World: Watch!

You may wish to revisit the thematic essay on pages 6–8 if it will help you focus your retreat time.

Take a couple of minutes to think about how well you did with your action from yesterday. Journal about it if that is useful.

Step 4. Respond to the Cry of the Prophets

Christ will come again when we least expect him. We know neither the day nor the hour. We also live with the assurance that Christ is already in time, in our day, with us at night, and in every place that we are. For every believer, time is eternal: Christ yesterday, today, and forever. However, we also look to the gatekeeper to remind us that, in fact, we live in this present moment, in our particular culture.

The gatekeeper is vigilant at all hours of the day. This urgent warrior seems not to rest, nor to rely on others for help. The image of the gatekeeper reminds us to use our time on earth well, to respect each moment of waiting and longing for God. Our watchfulness is rooted deeply within our faith and the fact that we already know Christ in our relationships, through the people we love intimately, and in our place in the world.

As we enter into the mystery of Advent, how do we use our time for serving others? Do we resist doing something new or out of our comfort zone? Are we stingy with our hours, our encounters, our way of being in the world? Do we resist the stranger, new requests on our schedules, or live a life too “busy” to listen to the needs of

people? Do we think we control every hour of the day, or can we rest in the assurance that Christ is in charge of the rising and the setting of the sun as we experience life?

1. I need to reconsider my attitudes about my use of time because

2. As I live today, I trust that God is

3. I describe my attitudes about time as

Action: Today I will be attentive to how I use time.

Step 5. Prayer: Writing Your Way to New Birth

Take a minute or two to look back at what you have written. Then compose a short prayer offering whatever is in your heart to God. Write it in the space below or in the quiet of your heart and mind.