

Stay Awake!

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.

Matthew 24:37–44

For as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

In (those) days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark.

They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man.

Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left.

Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left.

Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.

Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into.

So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.

Spend another minute or two in silent reflection.

Step 3. Connect to the Waiting World: Stay Awake!

I wake up every day to people living in relationships that are threatened or broken. I overhear the young mother begging for someone to help her because her boyfriend is back in prison and the streets are too violent for her infant son's survival. I listen to a middle-aged veteran tell me that he has not entered his family's home in nearly thirty years. A survivor of heroin slowly recaps his life to me as one by one all his friends and his family have disowned him.

Waking up to people's stories is never easy for me. I learn, however, that mustering the courage to receive a person's life is always another moment of grace. I need to listen to the stranger who finds herself severed from healthy relationships. These moments capture the real longing of people. These places of emptiness and despair carve out the place in which we all long for God to be born. I dare not take anyone for granted because the next relationship reveals the next lesson. These encounters teach me that people cannot be judged, nor should their stories be stored in some box and put on a shelf for later.

The authentic message for me in life and ministry is relationship. True and honest relationship is the core of Christianity. The reason for Christ's coming is simply to be in loving relationship with people. People enduring poverty become the Advent reminder for all of us that God aches to find us ready for faith and alert to others' needs. Among people living in poverty, the thief already has come. The robber is poverty itself, which strips away human dignity in the daylight. Poverty ravages the soul at night and leaves people vulnerable in early morning. Advent teaches me to build up the lives of people lost among the thieves of poverty, isolation, and neglect. In these moments, God is made visible, born among humanity.

I feel akin to the master of the house in Matthew's narrative. Regret and hand wringing are present—if unwritten—in the details of this story. If only he had stayed awake, the invasion into his house would not have happened. He lives in lament for his sleepiness—at not being attentive and present. Perhaps if he had stayed awake, he would have saved his belongings and treasures, and even the lives of other people.

I regret much about my limited ability to be present to people. If I only had paid more attention to that elderly man who just wanted to vent about his life, maybe he would not be so verbally outrageous. If I only had more resources, more money, or goods, then perhaps things could be different for the former prisoner who waits outside the chapel for clean clothing. If I only had more patience or kindness or more faith in God's investment in his believers, then maybe people living outside could find a home. These are the regrets I sort through in the early morning, much like the master of the house sorted through the wreckage after the thieves had carried off his valuables.

People's stories open up the real meaning of Advent. We wait for relationships to become right, balanced, and reconciled. We wait for equitable measures of goods, food, housing, clean water, and even love. We wait, knowing that only God can restore human relationships that are severed by violence or threatened by addictions, divorce, mental illness, aging, or disease. Advent is the time we begin to understand the story of Jesus from the

perspective of the poverty of people's experiences, the poverty of the human condition. We wait for hope as we voice our despair so that God will hear the cries of his people. We wait for love as we serve people most in need of the basics of life. Perhaps this is the year that justice shall find its home on earth and peace will flourish among all relationships.

I wake up every day living in the tension of God's presence already on earth and yet still waiting for the fullness of Christ's return. God invites me to listen to the stranger and to trust that love is still being born in our time and place. I believe in the wake-up call of these four weeks of Advent when I stop regretting the lack of what I have to offer people no matter their background or how much money they possess. I still believe that God finds a home on earth when I stop judging others and honor the raw and cumbersome stories of everyday people. I trust that when I fully wipe the sleep from my eyes, I will see the miracles of God reconciling the lost and forgotten. I wait for the Advent day when I will be fully awake.

Step 4. Respond to the Cry of the Prophets

At first reading, this gospel cleaves our hearts like a strong ax. Jesus tells his disciples that people in the days of Noah were feeling secure. While they were enjoying the things of the earth, the flood came and changed their priorities. Everything that people had clung to for security was destroyed.

This gospel grabs our awareness in Advent because God longs for our total and undivided attention. God longs to be in relationship with our hearts no matter how lonely, shattered, or selfish they may be.

I invite you to take stock of your earthly possessions. How is the meaning of your life attached to what you own? Does what you own, in fact, own your complete attention? Begin this Advent week by sorting through your heart to identify what makes you feel secure and how willing you are to find a new security in God. Sit in silence with the thoughts of how you cling to things of the earth and how you resist the love of God. See how your prayer, thoughts, and attitudes bear real change.

