

December 3, Advent 1B (Mark 13:24-37)

## **Keep awake, Jesus says, for God's new world is coming.**

by [Melissa Bills](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue

In the Book of Common Prayer, the service for compline (night prayer) includes the following closing prayer, attributed to Augustine:

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work or watch or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, comfort the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake.

When I was in seminary, a joint group of Lutheran and Catholic students shared compline together each Tuesday night. We sat in the choir stalls at the front of the Princeton University Chapel, in near darkness, our songs and prayers echoing throughout the vast stone church.

Compline, by design, is a service of completion. We reflect on the day that has passed, and we entrust ourselves to God's keeping as we prepare to enter into the mystical and temporary death of sleep. But compline also holds space for those who are not preparing for sleep, "those who work or watch or weep." Blessed are those who rest, and blessed are those who keep awake.

"Keep awake," Jesus says in our gospel reading, for God's new world is coming. In the Northern Hemisphere, this imperative to keep awake comes during a season of rapidly shortening days and early-falling nights. As we approach the winter solstice, and as our bodies crave more and deeper rest, the call to keep awake may feel impractical or ironic.

Of course, Jesus is not speaking literally about our sleep hygiene.

He is speaking about attentiveness and vigilance, about being spiritually prepared for the arrival of God's eternal reign when it breaks into the world.

The last time I pulled an all-nighter, I was working to finish a project that was creeping close to deadline. While my family slept comfortably upstairs in their beds, I held vigil in the family room, laptop perched on my knees, a cat curled up against the side of my leg and a half-empty bottle of Diet Coke balanced on the arm of the couch. As I worked late into the night, my heart kept returning to thoughts of those people elsewhere who also remained awake: those keeping watch at the bedsides of dying loved ones, new mothers tending to newborn babies, ICU nurses and first responders, night-shift workers at gas stations and factories, those suffering from insomnia or night terrors, stargazers, transportation workers, night owls finally moving toward rest, early risers already on the move.

I considered that each of them was keeping vigil in their own way, as they remained attentive to their needs and the needs of others, and as they encountered with watchfulness each mysterious movement of the night. I considered how the practice of keeping vigil is not merely a nighttime exercise. We can watch and wait and anticipate God's future and encounter divine beauty at any time of day or night, in joy or in sorrow. Because the wakefulness that Jesus asks of us is nothing other than the spiritual practice of paying attention.

"The Practice of Paying Attention" is the title of a chapter in Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World*. In it she attends to the art of reverence, of paying attention to the world and encountering all that is sacred, holy, and beautiful therein. She writes, "Regarded properly, anything can become a sacrament, by which I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection." To regard something properly is to engage in the practice of paying attention, which "is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. . . . It is one way into a different way of life, full of treasure for those who are willing to pay attention to exactly where they are."

Jesus urges us to be attentive, that we remain prepared for the full and final in-breaking of God's reign when it comes. When we do this, when we commit to the spiritual practice of paying attention, we find that we catch glimpses of this reign each and every day.

God's reign is found in the dancing of a candle flame, lighted in prayer at the end of the day. It's in the deep questions that only come to us when we are frustratingly unable to stay asleep at night, in the wonder of the stars that rise at night. It is embodied by the weary ones, dozing in hospital recliners, beside loved ones who are sick or dying. It is found in the twitching of a cat's ears. God's reign is present in the holy gift of work.

Each day, Jesus again whispers this directive into our hearts: *Stay awake*. God's kingdom will come, and we will be ready to welcome it. Because we have already been paying attention. We have already awakened and are holding vigil for the world.