

26 November 2006
Last Sunday in the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Keep Awake!”

Text: Mark 13:32-37; Jude 20-25; Daniel 7:13-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We prayed earlier in the Collect of the Day: *Lord God, heavenly Father, send forth Your Son, we pray, that He may lead home His bride, the Church . . .*

One of the happiest days for any man or woman in this life is the day they get married. If you are married, you probably remember that day. If you are not yet married, you may have dreams of what that day will be like. It is a day filled with excitement and hopes and expectations and joy. A day of looking forward to a promising future. The first day of a new life now lived and shared together. And so marriages are great celebrations.

And so *also* no one gets married *expecting* to have problems, or to get divorced, or to find themselves drifting apart or being pulled apart. But the sad reality is that those things happen. For all kinds of reasons. And it's sad when what started out with such excitement and promise ends with such sorrow. When instead of growing closer together, a husband and wife grow apart. And instead of growing into one another, they simply grow bored with one another.

So on this Last Sunday in the Church Year, Jesus tells us **“Be on guard, keep awake!”** because what can happen to husbands and wives *can also happen to Christians* as we await our Heavenly Bridegroom. For just as with the joy of a wedding day, no one becomes a Christian *expecting* to fall away, or to stop going to church, or to become weaker in their faith. But the sad reality is that those things happen. And it's sad when what started out with such promise ends with such sorrow. When instead of growing closer to his Saviour, a Christian grows apart. And instead of growing into Christ, the Christian grows used to her Saviour, and takes Him for granted, and falls away.

This is the “sleepiness” that Jesus is referring to in the Holy Gospel today. The spiritual stupor that can come upon Christians that can end in spiritual death. And it is *the greatest danger* facing you as you live your life in this world. For the greatest threat to you is not persecution, or terrorism, or bad health, or economic collapse, or anything else you fear

in this world. It is to grow used to your Saviour and bored with Him. It is to take your faith for granted. It is to think that you don't need the Church and can make it on your own. None of us *expects* that to happen . . . but it does, doesn't it? And so we do well this day to consider these words of Jesus, and apply them to ourselves: ***“Be on guard, keep awake!”***

But the truth is: that is easier said than done, isn't it? For Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh are all singing us a sinful lullaby, trying to lure us away from our Saviour and into the death of spiritual sleep. Telling us to relax and take it easy. Whispering into our ears that our sins are sweet nothings and not so bad. Seducing us into thinking that we have plenty of time to make things right. Lulling us into thinking that the busy-ness of life that elbows out our reading of the Scriptures and our prayers is perfectly understandable. And those little sins, the subtle sins, the everyone-does-them sins? Shhh. Don't let them bother your conscience! *Sleep*, good Christian. *Sleep* in complacency. *Sleep* in security. *Sleep* . . . or like those old hypnotists used to say: *You're getting sleepier and sleepier* . . .

It's happened to you, hasn't it? I know it has because there is no Christian Satan leaves alone! And He knows how to get at each of us . . . and the world keeps eating away at us . . . and our old sinful flesh just gets so tired of the struggle . . . and the siren song of the lullaby sounds so good . . .

And so today Jesus calls out to us *four times*: ***Keep awake!*** Do not go gently into that spiritual night. Do not listen to the lying voice of Satan. Resist temptation and hate sin. Keep the commandments. Be constant in prayer. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scriptures. Remember your baptism. Feed and strengthen your faith. Set your mind on things above. Lift up your heart unto the Lord. Have mercy on others. Be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. It is important! ***For the master of the house is returning, and you do not know when.***

But who among us is able to do all these things? That *un*holy trinity of Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh is too much for us. Satan is too *wily*, the world too *wicked*, and our sinful flesh too *wishy-washy*! And as hard as you try, how often have you fallen and failed? No, if our spiritual health, our spiritual life, depended on us, we would be lost. Temporally *and* eternally.

And so how good to hear from Jude today! Did you hear what he said? ***Now to him who is able! To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy!*** Yes, there is One who is able, where we are not. It is the One who kept Noah safe in the flood. The One who kept Abraham safe in the days of his pilgrimage. The One who kept Israel from stumbling through the

wilderness to the Promised Land, giving them manna to eat and water from a rock to drink. The One who kept David safe from Goliath, Bathsheba, and Absalom, his son! The One who kept the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the One who kept Daniel safe from the lions. The One who kept Peter safe from his own fears and denials, and Thomas safe from his doubting. And the One who even now keeps His Bride, the Church, safe against the gates of hell and the gaping jaws of heresy. ***He is able.***

And He is not only *able*, but has *promised to give you life by His Word*. Both physical and spiritual life, by His powerful Word. By His Word which called forth all of creation in the beginning. His Word which called forth a “sleeping” Lazarus from the tomb. And His Word which calls us forth from death to life in the waters of Holy Baptism. His Word which is able to keep us awake, until He comes again. His Word of Law to correct and terrify us, and His Word of Gospel to comfort and forgive us. His Word which makes bread and wine His body and blood to feed us, forgive us, and strengthen us in the days of *our* pilgrimage. His Word that tells us of our Saviour’s love and care and faithfulness and promise – that He wants none to fall asleep; He desires none to fall away and die. From first to last, from beginning to end, *He wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* (1 Tim 2:4)

And so He gives His Word, and with His Word His life-giving Spirit, to not only keep us awake, but that we may grow into Him. Into a mature love. Like the love of a husband and wife celebrating their golden anniversary and who know each other intimately; and who know the meaning of the words: *for better or for worse*. . . . Your Saviour knows that love; that deep love; that cross love. He is the Bridegroom who laid down His life for His rebellious and unfaithful bride because in His love for you, He could do no less. For His vow to us was not simply: *for better or for worse, or till death do us part* – but far greater! For He knew the worse, the sin, and so through His own death and resurrection, made sure that even death could not part us! That by grace through faith, we might live with Him forever. A bride washed clean and spotless and blameless by her Bridegroom’s own blood!

And this is the Bridegroom who is returning for you! And not just a Bridegroom, *but a King*, as we heard from Daniel. When that day comes for each of us, none of us knows. Maybe it will be on the Last Day – the end of all things as we know them. Or maybe it will be for you sooner than that – the day when you breathe your last, and your *body* rests in the sleep of death. None of us knows which will come first, *but neither does it matter*. For you have the promise of Your Saviour to keep you in life and in death. Your Saviour who has given us the Divine Service here each week to act as a kind of dress rehearsal for the wedding, that you be ready. For here your Bridegroom comes to you *each week*, forgiving you, feeding you, and keeping you, until one day we *will* follow to the Wedding

Hail! (LW #177) And what a day that will be!

Until then, **keep awake!** in Christ. For He is able. Rely on Him. In His grace, His promise, His strength.

Lord God, heavenly Father, send forth Your Son, we pray, that He may lead home His bride, the Church, that we with all the redeemed may enter into Your eternal kingdom.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.