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“Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33).

### **First Sunday of Advent**

*Isa 63:16b-17, 19b, 64:2-7; Ps 80; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37*

The four Sundays of Advent put us in the mode and spirit of watchfulness. Sentinels at their posts watch for intruders during the night. Sailors high in the crow's nest watch for approaching shoals that might endanger the ship. Parents lie sleepless in their beds waiting for their children to come home safe. Children fight sleep to be awake when visitors come on Christmas Eve.

What are we watching for? Advent focuses our spiritual eyes to see God at work in the world and in our lives. As darkness sharpens our sight, the weeks of Advent draw us more acutely into the ever-present mystery of God in all things. Today's responsorial Psalm 80 prays that God will turn us from all the other things we are looking at to see the divine face. Conversion of heart is the work of Advent, to know what is most important and timely in our lives. God is calling us to be awake and conscious of who we are.

Jesus is the most explicit affirmation of God's image and likeness in us. The mystery of the Incarnation uncovers the divine in human identity. This is why Jesus invited us to look at him and imitate him, because he lived an authentic human life. He says to us, "This is also who you are. The purpose of your life is to know God and yourself in relationship with God and to live in right relationship with one another and all Creation."

The challenge of Advent is that God did not come as Isaiah warned, "rending the heavens and the mountains quaking before him." The Incarnation is hiding in a child, whose smile waits to be reciprocated. Salvation is not shouted but whispered, not a lightning bolt but a vigil flame flickering in the shadows. It does not inflame the world but is passed from one heart to the next, guarded to keep it from going out as it grows and pushes back the darkness.

Jesus is the model for our salvation, coming not to rescue us but to teach us how to live so that God's will for the world will unfold in our lives and make humanity a beloved community instead of a war zone for domination. Advent comes as an invitation to choose life for ourselves and our world by embracing the path Jesus showed us toward peace and justice.

Advent is a survival plan whose instructions are written on our hearts, but we must stop long enough to read and follow them. The master of the household has left us in charge and told us to be alert, for we do not know when the time will come. This is our Advent work, to guard the flame in the watches of the night and to remain faithful until he comes.

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