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Advent: Time to be on the look out

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Advent begins this year in Mark's Gospel with Jesus' command to wake up, stand on guard, be on the look out, and keep watch. It's a strong reminder, perfect for such fearful times as these. As we begin this holy season of preparation, renewal, and prayer, we're urged to awake from the American nightmare, deepen our contemplative roots in Advent nonviolence, reclaim our souls, restart our search for the God of peace, get ready for Jesus and prepare for his Christmas gift of "peace on earth," with all its glorious social, economic and political implications.

In Arlington, Virginia, this past weekend, for the first Sunday of Advent, I preached on that strange Gospel text (Mark 13:33-37), a passage right out of Holy Week. Such an unusual word to begin the Advent season -- not at all a Christmasy theme. Jesus utters the words three days before he's executed.

"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 gate keeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at 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!'"

Mark's Gospel is written just a few years before Roman soldiers march on Jerusalem and scarcely leave one stone on top of another. And Mark's Jesus warns about the impending doom. Keep watch, be alert, be

ready. Mark begins telling us the time (the *Kairos*) is at hand. The story ends with: now it is come. A kind of "apocalypse now."

Today the church turns those apocalyptic warnings around and uses them to start a new liturgical year. Wake up, we're told. Prepare anew for the coming of Christ again. The God of peace who could arrive at any moment.

It's an appropriate image for Advent, an image indeed for all our lives. For waiting, watching -- it's the task of our lives. You, me, the global church, all are summoned to keep watch, stay awake.

The Gospel would shake us from our weariness. "Don't sleep while Mumbai burns. Don't yield to the culture's allures: shopping, selfishness, indifference, violence and war. Don't act as if there is no God, as if change is impossible, as if there's nothing you can do. Don't sleep as apocalypse encroaches. Don't remain unaware of the world's agony. Wake up! Look around! See what's happening. Get ready for peace!"

The text carries us beyond the banality of the season --- the tinsel, trees, candy canes and Santa Claus. We're free from all that. Advent says: "This is your chance to start again. Prepare to receive the Christmas gift of peace?"

The very song the angels sang to the shepherds "keeping watch." The song filled the sky, glorifying the God who vouchsafes to a bellicose world "peace on earth."

We should attune our ear to their voices and take in the hope and set our hopes on the God of peace. And as we welcome the gift we begin the work to end all that is not peace, to say no to war, weapons, greed and fear.

We shrug off consumerism, routine. We stop our ears to media blather and election analysis. We look askance at the claims of prestige of the military and its might. Instead we spend more time each day with God and meditate on what it means to wait for the coming of God. We practice contemplative peace to learn to be peaceful. We learn to be at ease with the task of being awake.

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Being awake, we'll move from consumerism to simplicity. We'll let go and share. Especially important as economies teeter and needs grow beyond measure. In so doing we'll reclaim our humanity, our core values. The path of downward mobility will affirm the dignity of our lives.

We'll move, too, from despair to hope, practicing hope by doing hopeful things.

And most importantly of all, we'll move from violence to nonviolence. In fresh awareness, we'll see the

violence within us and around us --- perhaps for the first time. From our personal lives to the Pentagon, from Baghdad to Guantanamo to Mumbai from Washington to Wal-Mart, where last Friday stampeding shoppers trampled a New York employee and crushed him to death.

And so this Advent let's become visionaries. Let's reclaim our imaginations and say "Yes, we can. Yes, a new world is possible; indeed, a new world is coming" --- a new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons, violence or global warming. Get ready for it. Urge others to prepare. Such preparation is the spiritual task at hand.

A final blessing. May these holy Advent days renew our lives, lead us to peace, fill us with grace and hope, disarm our hearts, turn us back toward the God of peace, and make us faithful watchers, ready for Jesus and his Christmas gift of peace.

Together, we sing: "O come o come, Emanuel! Come, Lord Jesus."

This week, John Dear speaks in Baltimore and Gaithersburg, Maryland about his new autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press, available from www.amazon.com). Many of these NCR Café columns have now been published in a new collection from Eerdmans Publishing, called *Put Down the Sword*. For info, see: www.johndear.org.

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