1st Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2026 Pastor Chris Repp
Mark 13:24-37 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
Some years back I compared the first Sunday of Advent with a wedding rehearsal, and I shared one of my pastor's tricks of the trade, namely starting the rehearsal at the end, with the recessional. You line up the wedding party in the where they are going to be during the service, and then the first thing you practice is walking out. It seems counterintuitive, but there is a very good reason for doing it that way. You start at the end so everyone will know where they are going. They've been in their places in the wedding party line up, so when you then practice the processional, everyone knows exactly what they're doing and ends up in the right place. It's not a bad analogy for how the church year bends around on itself. Except for the fact that I've been pointing out repeatedly over the past three weeks, the fact that apocalyptic chapters like this one are not the end of the story. But if we keep that in mind today, that this little apocalypse is leading us to the real end – through Jesus' death and resurrection to sending his disciples back to Galilee where he promises to meet them – then the analogy works. We start at that end today with a vision of Jesus' promise fulfilled, and the assurance of God's good future.

As I was working through today's text, though, and preparing to help us shift from Matthew to Mark, another comparison occurred to me, evoked by Jesus' exhortation to keep awake, to watch and pay attention. I was taken back to my childhood at this time of year when good friends from Indiana would show up sometime in the week after Christmas Day to ring in the new year with us. The parents of that family had taught with my dad at the high school, and they had three kids the same age as our four. What I remember was the waiting. Knowing they were coming and being so excited. There was more to do than wait, of course, even for us kids, not least of which was getting our rooms in order. But the waiting is what is such a strong memory for me. My bedroom window faced the front of the house, and from it I could see down the street and across the neighbor's lawn to the cross street that was the way into our neighborhood. I would watch as the headlights of approaching cars lit up the street before they emerged from behind the neighbor's house. Then it was waiting to see if they would turn our direction, or head to somewhere else in the neighborhood. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, they would arrive, and the fun would begin.

Today's Gospel reading starts off by evoking that kind of anticipation. The Son of Man is coming with power and glory, and that's a good thing. He's bringing angels with him to gather his elect. More good news. And then we're told to notice the signs. There will be signs of his coming before he arrives – like a fig tree shows signs that summer is on the way, or maybe like those headlight beams as I watched and waited from my bedroom window. In the days before cell phones and Google maps you had to wait, because you didn't plan your arrival to the minute the way we do today, and you couldn't let people know if you were delayed, not without stopping to find a pay phone. Of course, in the first century there were no phones, and travel was mostly by foot. For a long trip you couldn't even be sure what day you might arrive. So, waiting and watching was normal. It was even someone's job.

I think my childhood nostalgia is helpful in connecting us at least partly with what Advent is all about. Advent, of course, means coming, or arrival. And it has a double focus. Here on the first Sunday of Advent we direct our attention to Jesus' so-called second coming, when he will come again to judge the living and the dead, as our creed puts it. But when you put it that way, Jesus' return starts to sound a little ominous, and his instruction to keep awake and keep

alert can feel like a threat. We don't want him to catch us sleeping when he finally shows up, or the judging might not go so well for us. Where my comparison fails is that it subtly looks back, as all nostalgia does, to a time when things were good and cozy and secure, at least in our minds. And when you regard the present from that vantage point, with all that has been lost, and then consider the end of the world, well that can be downright frightening.

But the community that Mark wrote his Gospel for was not living their best life, even in their minds. Nor had their childhoods been idyllic. They were living through very difficult times. You could even say that they had already lived through the end of the world, at least the end of *their* world. Scholars estimate that Mark wrote his Gospel sometime around the year 70 of the common era, when the Roman Army sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. That on top of centuries of domination by one foreign power after another had ravaged their land and their people, and left little to be hoped for. Life for them was marginal and desperate. Even God, it seemed, had abandoned them. For people living in that kind of reality, Jesus' words here in Mark 13 sound different than they might to us. This was a promise that God had *not* abandoned them and that a better future was coming. Yes, there was judgment in that future, but judgment looks different when you have been on the receiving end of domination, exploitation, and cruelty.

Mark's community wouldn't have stopped reading where we did today. They would have read through to the real end. What comes next are the last supper, Jesus' arrest, his trial, and his crucifixion. In that continuation of the story, they would have seen God with them in Jesus, his suffering mirroring their own. They would have seen Jesus' world end there on the cross, with a cry of misery and despair at God's absence. And then they would have learned that that was not the end of the story, either for Jesus or for those who had followed him, in spite of their failures. And of all the Gospels, Mark's is the one where the disciples' failures are most prominent. They don't keep awake. Those hours of the watch that Jesus reels off here – evening, midnight, cockcrow, and dawn – all point to moments of failure for the disciples. But though they abandon Jesus, he does not abandon them. Their judgment came, but Jesus took it upon himself, so that their doom – and ours – might be averted.

As we begin this new church year and this new season of Advent, we are in different places in our lives. Some of us are living idyllic childhoods like mine. Some of us are in the midst of work and family life. Some of us are entering, or are well into, our later days. And some of us have already lived through the end of the world, or at least the ends of *our* worlds. Some of us have lost employment. A number have lost beloved spouses. Some have even lost children. For all of us, wherever we find ourselves today, Advent is the season of hope, as you might have noticed posted on our sign outside. It is the season of hope even and especially if your world has already ended in significant ways. It is the season that looks forward from whatever life has been for us so far to the promise of new life already springing forth in the here and now thanks to Jesus' cross and resurrection. There are signs of its coming in the life of the church gathered around word and sacrament, signs in our caring for one another, for our community, and our world. And so we watch and we wait with eager expectation, trusting the promise of the one who has come, and who is coming, to make all things new. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, now and in the life that is yet to come. Amen.