

In November of 1988 there was a devastating house fire in a suburb of Dallas, Texas. A single family dwelling burned to the ground, killing five people. What made the situation even more tragic was that the owner Sonny Simpson, had been planning for two weeks to install smoke alarms.

Simpson told reporters that it was something that he kept putting off because he was too busy with other things. Now five individuals were dead and there was nothing he or anyone could do to bring them back.

I know that this might seem a depressing way to start a homily that is talking about the anticipation of Advent, but the reality is we all have at times been in Sonny Simpson's shoes. There are things that we put off doing because we are too busy. We'll get to them sooner or later. There are parents who want to get to know their children better, but it keeps being put off. Husbands and wives

recognize that they need to sit down and rekindle the fire in their relationship but it will have to wait until there's a free evening or week end. Even priests when they get the word that someone is sick or in need of a visit will put it off until there is a better time to go. The human tendency is to put things off until later but a closer look shows that perhaps the problem isn't that humans put things off as much as it is missing opportunities that come along. Sonny had plenty of opportunities in the two weeks before the fire to install those alarms; he simply missed the chances to do it. The same is true for us; we miss all kinds of opportunities to do the things that we ought to do.

Jesus is addressing this in the gospel today. Talking about his return at the end of the world, he says, "Be on guard....the great day will suddenly close in on you like a

trap...So be on the watch. Pray constantly.” Jesus is warning all of us about getting so involved with the ordinary things of life that we forget about the important things of life.

BE ON GUARD! WATCH! PRAY!

This season of Advent is a season of preparation. The word Advent means “coming”. So the name defines the season.

We are to make ready for the coming of Jesus into our hearts and our homes. The season of Advent is like the Roman God Janus the god for whom the month of January is named. Janus is depicted as having two faces. The one face looks backward into the past; the other face looks forward into the future. That is how we should celebrate Advent. We look back into the past and relive Jesus’ first coming some 2,000 years ago and yet we also should be looking to the future reminding ourselves of his second

coming at the end of time.

Today we are at the midpoint between the two great moments in the history of our world. Our task is to familiarize ourselves with our story of Israel's anticipation of the coming of the Messiah in history. We need to reread the days leading up to the birth of Christ into our world.

Review the characters and the roles they played in announcing the newborn King into our lives. We also should anticipate Jesus' final coming at the end of time. We should prepare for that incredible moment when Jesus returns in power and majesty to take us with him into his Father's heavenly kingdom.

To help us in these two endeavors we introduce our homes and our churches to the Advent wreath, a natural clock that burns away the weeks of Advent right before our very eyes. Now is the time to make ourselves ready and to

remind ourselves not to become too busy with the affairs of this world and miss the opportunities God gives us to be ready for the next world.

A few years ago this prayer was written for the Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. It captures the theme of our liturgy for the first week of the Advent season:

O Great Spirit

Whose voice I hear in the winds,

And whose breath gives life to all the world.

Hear me! I am small and weak. I need your strength and wisdom. Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset. Make my hands respect the things you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice. Make me wise so that I may understand the things you have taught my people.

Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock. I seek strength not to be greater than my brother, but to fight my greatest enemy, myself.

Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes.

So when life fades, as the fading sunset, my spirit may come to you without shame. Amen.

