

Brookland: Facing the Future: Awake, Alert, and unAfraid

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Preacher: Victor Sheldon

[0 : 00] Victor Sheldon to come up here. Victor is a dear friend. He's been a part of our church for several years. If you don't know him, that may be because he's also a chaplain with the Navy, and so he has been on duty. He was posted in Djibouti for a year, and then he was back for a little while, and then he received his next assignment, which was to go and serve in Louisiana for this coming calendar year. It's our pleasure whenever we get Victor back in town to get time with him, and it's our pleasure to welcome him to come up and preach God's Word to us.

So Victor, I'll invite you to come on up, and let's welcome Victor. Thanks, Tommy. Thanks, brother. Well, it's a great joy to be with you and to be back here.

There were, as I've shared with Tommy and others, there were some very dark days in Djibouti, some wonderful days, but also some great challenges, and the one thing that kept me sort of going from day in and day out are the prayers of this church family and my own conviction that God would bring me back safely home. So thank you. Thanks, Tommy. Thanks for having me. I've now realized, well, you all up here at the front, these lights are incredibly bright, and so I am, yes, I can't see you, but I trust you can see me. So, well, let's pray together, and we'll look at our scripture for today and explore together. Let's pray. Lord Jesus Christ, thou Son of God and Son of Man, Lord, as we have sung, we do. We wait for you. We long for you. For you alone are our hope. Gracious God, I ask that by your Holy Spirit, you would grant us grace that what we say with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, we may believe in our hearts, that we might show forth in our lives.

[2 : 44] All this to your great honor and glory through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Well, a number of years ago, my father decided to take my mom, my brother, and I on the great East Coast American history tour, and I've come to love history. My father does, I do, and I think all of our family are enamored with history, but we made our way up the East Coast from the South, and we stopped at every single battlefield or historic monument you could possibly imagine.

And so by the time we finally reached New York City, we were all a bit exhausted, but still enthralled in all the newness and everything that we were seeing. And even as a young boy, I remember that first arrival and trip into New York City. And this was back, goodness gracious, this was back in the late 60s or early 70s. And my father, with I think the Alabama plates at that time, had Heart of Dixie on the bottom of them. So my father, you know, a smart man that he is and never asking for directions, took the wrong turn off the off ramp up there, and we ended up in Harlem. And I remember the anxiety, you could feel the anxiety level in the car rising, because that was a dangerous time in the city and in Harlem at that time. And I remember my mom rolling down the window and asking a very kind, elderly, African-American black gentleman, please, sir, could you help us get out of here and find our way? And we did. But I remember that first experience of going to New York City and just being so impressed with everything.

And I remember we went there to see a show called Three on a Match. It was one of these game shows that was held at NBC Studios at 30 Rockefeller Center. And I remember that experience and seeing that.

But I remember most about the city was the busyness, the energy, and how smartly dressed all the people were. It was very impressive. And of course, the most impressive thing to me as a young boy, being in Manhattan for the first time, was the majesty, the grandeur, the awesomeness of the buildings. I mean, I remember walking up as a young boy and just, you know, just looking up, and you keep looking up and up and up and up and up.

And just the height and expanse of the buildings. And I remember thinking to myself, how in the world did people do this? How could people make these buildings and create this incredible space? [5 : 48] I was in awe, awestruck with the majesty and grandeur of the cityscape of New York City. Now, Mark chapter 13, which we read the last section from this morning, opens with a scene of Jesus and one of his followers as they are leaving the temple, the temple compound in Jerusalem.

In fact, let me read to you in verse 1 of Mark 13. And as Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, Look, teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings. The temple was an incredible space. It was something to behold. Perhaps you could relate to it if those of you who visited New York City, you may recall your own first experience there and what impressed you with that.

Or if you've not been to New York City, perhaps you remember the first time you saw our nation's capital, perhaps it was the National Cathedral, or if you've had the opportunity to travel out west and driven from the east to the west and seen the Rocky Mountains as they rise up behind the city of Denver.

It just takes your breath away. It's just an incredible experience. It's awe-inspiring. It's awe-inspiring. That there is something here greater than ourselves.

[7 : 20] And you get a sense, at least I did, of the transcendence of things in the world. I was left with a sense of both excitement, but also it humbled me.

It reminded me of my humanness and also a sense of quiet confidence in the world around me. In Mark chapter 13, verse 2, after that follower of Jesus, one of his disciples says to him and explains about the temple and the buildings and the stones, Jesus replies to him, Do you see these great buildings?

I tell you the truth. There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. Everything will be destroyed.

Well, you can imagine what the reaction of that first follower, that early disciple of Jesus, how he must have responded when he heard that.

Because the temple, I don't know if you know much about the temple. I know a little bit and I want to learn more. But scholars tell us that the temple, the outside compound or wall of the temple, the western wall particularly, was probably about four to five football fields in length.

[8 : 48] And if you travel to Jerusalem as a spiritual pilgrim during the feast, the festivals, and the holidays, as you're moving towards Jerusalem, Jerusalem is up. You go up and into Jerusalem.

And it would be incredible. You could have seen the temple compound and the temple itself, the exterior of the Holy of Holies. You could have seen it from a distance.

And as a follower of Yahweh, it would have encouraged your heart. It would have lifted your spirits to see the magnificence, the beauty, the awe, the wonder of that temple, which is the seat of your faith and the God whom you worship.

So it must have been quite a shock to that early disciple, that follower of Jesus, to hear the Lord say, Do you see these buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another.

Well, it begs the question, I think, for us is, where do you and I, where do we find a sense of peace and security? Where do you find your confidence and your trust?

[10 : 03] Many people find it in the created order, in the sense of the creation without, outside of us, like the Rocky Mountains.

Others may find their peace and security, their confidence and trust in their family, in the relationships, which are anchors for them. Some would look to government, look to government and the civil realm for security and peace and confidence.

Others look to religion as a source of strength. Still others might look to their possessions, you know, the one with the most toys at the end wins.

Some look to what they have for their security. Others may look to their retirement account, their 401k or their investments. In times of stress and uncertainty, we tend to cling to what we know and what we trust, because that's where we find our security.

What if someday all that you knew and trusted and believed was secure was taken away? I remember I was a young clergyman, a young minister, a curate, an assistant at a downtown, a beautiful downtown church, and our young adults were going on a walk for muscular dystrophy.

[11 : 34] And I told my dad, because I had a big wedding that night, that evening I was officiating, and I said, Dad, you go ahead and go on the walk with them and I'll meet you back at the house and

then we'll go from there.

And so I remember Dad coming back from the walk for muscular dystrophy and feeling so, just not sweating and not feeling himself. And so I called a friend from the church, from the parish who was a physician, and Andy came over and he checked my dad out and he said to my dad, his name is Joe, and he said to me, Victor, I think we need to get your dad to the emergency room right away. So Dad followed me in his car down to the emergency room of the hospital and then I went on to take care of the wedding. I came back thinking his car would not be there in the ER parking lot any longer and so I rolled back in, I saw his car, I was surprised, and I walked into the ER and dressed like this, you know, with collar and everything on and one of the nurses pulled me aside, she grabbed me and she said, I've got to tell you something.

I need to tell you that your dad has had a serious heart attack. What? What? And she took me up into the ICU.

Thankfully, my dad made it through that experience and that sort of dark night of the soul, but that was the first time that I realized my father would not live forever.

[13:13] I never knew, really knew and experienced that one day my dad would pass away. that never was made real to me until that experience. So what would you do?

How would you react if everything, all that you trusted and put your confidence in, someday is taken away? This at least in part is the point of Mark chapter 13.

It's often called Mark's little apocalypse. Mark chapter 13. It's a distillation, if you will, a condensed version of the main points of the book of Revelation.

And that's why it's often called Mark's little apocalypse. Now, I've sort of drawn the title for this sermon as awake, alert, and unafraid.

But it could also be titled unexpected, unplanned, and unwelcome. I remember holding a dinner party many years ago.

[14:16] I love dinner parties, but I don't like to host them. And guys and gals, I don't know how you all do it.

I stand amazed at you, those of you who can cook and greet and entertain and be back. I can't do it. I've tried. And it stresses me out to the max.

And I remember having people over for a dinner party and I wanted, you know, wanted everything to be right. And I was busy and I was behind as is typical for me, late for everything.

And I remember the first group of folks came to the door and knocked on the door. I opened the door in horror to see that it was them, some of my guests. And I told them, I said, look, I'm not ready for you yet.

Go away. Go away. Come back in 30 minutes. And I literally, I did that. I said, just drive around the block, visit the neighborhood. Well, it's this kind of experience that Jesus wants to prevent in one sense.

[15:22] That he is coming again. He will return in power and great glory. And when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith?

On the earth. Will we be ready? Will we welcome him? Will his agenda and his timing and his coming, is that more important?

Or is my dinner party, my career, my relational pursuits, my acquiring possessions, my investments, or my striving for whatever, is that more important than his second coming?

Well, I want to look briefly at the context this morning of this section of Mark chapter 13, verses 27 and following. And I want to explore with you these main points or these sort of life lessons, I think, that Jesus teaches us and leaves us with about being awake, alert, but also unafraid.

For like the temple that is going to be torn apart, stone upon stone taken down, it seems to me that Jesus is telling us in this section of Mark chapter 13 that the building blocks, the bedrock of both society, culture, nature, and even our personal lives, everything is going to be shaken.

[17:02] Everything is going to be shaken. And ultimately, everything is going to be swept away. This is why we call it the end times.

The end times. I love the, I saw a bumper sticker, or heard about a bumper sticker which I think is absolutely perfect.

I mean, I love Washington, D.C. and I've worked here in the Pentagon and had two tours of duty here. I'm coming back after this next year. I'm on a one-year assignment to New Orleans, but I'm coming back and planting myself here, God willing.

So I love, I love D.C. There's wonderful things about D.C. But I think this sort of bumper sticker really sort of capsules my own experience of D.C.

Jesus is coming back soon. Everybody, look busy. I thought that was good. You don't agree.

[18 : 08] It's not my fault. Jesus says that everything is going to be shaken. Everything is going to be swept away. And a time will come, he says earlier in Mark chapter 13, that there will rise up false religious leaders, messiahs of a type, who will lead people astray.

That the world will experience war and strife and conflict as it's never known. That there will be natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

That for us, his followers, yes, there will be persecution and intense suffering. And finally, Jesus says in Mark 13 that there will be betrayal.

Even within families. It would make the French Revolution look like something minor in comparison. Brother will betray brother. Mother will betray daughter.

Children will betray their parents. So all of society, everything, just completely comes unglued.

Every stone is taken down. And yet, what remains?

[19 : 26] Does anything remain? Jesus tells us, yes. this is what remains. Let's see.

Well, I'm looking for the exact... Well, anyway, in Mark chapter 13, he tells us what does remain. He says, heaven and earth will pass away.

But my words, he says, will not pass away. The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. And this is marvelous in our eyes.

Brothers and sisters, when all is shaken and swept away, the only thing that remains, the only thing that will remain, is Jesus Christ.

Christ, and his body, the church. And yet, beloved, the only, the only way you will come to know and experience and learn that Jesus Christ is all you need is until you're put in a position, in a situation, in which Jesus Christ really is all you have.

[20 : 55] He's all you have. Christ and his church are all you have. And then you'll discover that his words are true.

He really is all you need. Well, all of this begs the question, I think, of, as Dan was praying and alluding to, what are we to do with this?

Okay, what, how are we to respond? Can we prepare? I mean, what, how do we think and get our minds around this? You know, for many Christians, for many believers, well-meaning believers, the second coming seems like light years away.

Now, most of you all here this morning, you're, you're in the, maybe not the first quarter of your lives, but you're in the early part, perhaps, hopefully, God willing, you're in the early second quarter of your lives.

And, and I, I'm in, I'm in the start of my fourth quarter, right? Probably. So, all of this is closer to me.

[22 : 06] It's much closer to me. But nevertheless, it impacts us both the same. But some Christians fall into the danger or the temptation to thinking that, well, the second coming, since it's been so delayed, I mean, it could be months, it could be years, it could be decades, it could be centuries.

So, if the second coming is that far away, how and why should it have any impact on me? What difference does it make? Well, Mark's gospel and this section in chapter 13 really sort of, sort of drops a bomb, if you will, into the middle of all that.

And Mark's point is that since the time is unknown, and it is, neither the son, the son does not know the hour, only the father. But since the time is unknown, it could be today, it could be this evening, it could be at midnight, or at sunrise.

And Jesus warns us not to slip into complacency, into that, that sort of mindset, if you will, of one of my great heroes, Scarlett O'Hara from Gone with the Wind.

Her phrase, if you haven't read the book, it's a great read, I love the book. The movie is fantastic, but the book is, is great. And Scarlett, throughout the book, her mantra is, I'm not going to think about that today.

[23 : 46] I'll think about that tomorrow. For tomorrow is another day. So she refuses to put off, and she continues to put off, that which is most pressing for her.

But Mark encourages us, the Lord encourages us through the gospel of Mark, to be awake, to be alert, and to be unafraid.

Well, let's look at those things. What does it mean to be awake? To be awake. C.S. Lewis wrote that we live in a world that is spiritually deaf, almost as if the world is asleep.

The Bible tells us that in many times and in many places, there really is no fear of God. There is no fear of God.

And what I told dear friends and colleagues, and I visited some of the most remotest parts of Africa. I mean, the middle of the jungle, in the Congo, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, places where, you know, no one would normally ever go.

[25 : 02] And they asked me about our life in the West and particularly in America. And I shared with them what I love about you all and just being with you is that you know, you know you feel daily your need for God.

We in the West, we really have no need of Him. And so many, so many today just dismiss, oh, they give lip service and credence to it, but they dismiss the existence and the power of God.

So much of our culture today and our world is essentially asleep. And to be asleep means that you're unaware of what's happening around you. Friday afternoon, I was so tired and I was checking into a hotel near the Pentagon and the room wasn't ready, so I sat down on the comfortable couch in the lobby and I promptly fell asleep.

I mean, I fell asleep. And I woke up to the sound of laughter. I could hear a couple of, there were old people like me too, and there were a couple of people laughing at me and kind of looking at me. Well, to fall asleep is to lose sight of your surroundings and the world around you. It's to fall into your own dream state and your own created world.

[26 : 32] It's asleep to me, it means asleep means to be unable or unwilling to respond. When you're asleep, you're in your own world.

And Jesus tells us, don't fall asleep. Don't become complacent. stay awake. Stay aware of the world around you.

To be awake is to see. Of course, the metaphor for sight is so powerful and popular in the scriptures and particularly in the gospels.

To be awake is to see the world around you as it is, but also to see it through the eyes of your faith, to see it as God sees it. To be awake is to be able to respond to what you see.

And to be awake is to be on guard. On guard. And I've got to tell you as one who has cared for and been the chaplain or pastor for a lot of young men and women who stand guard duty around the world, I can tell you that being on guard is often somewhat can be kind of boring.

[27 : 55] You know, it's not flashy. It's not sexy. You know, it's your standing guard duty for four hours. And yet, is being on guard, is it essential?

Absolutely. Is it important? You better believe it. And if someone falls asleep on guard duty, that's a punishable offense. Because you've put us all in jeopardy and at risk.

And so to be on guard means to be aware and alert to the situation around you. And then Jesus tells us, as he's saying, to stay awake. He's also reminding us to stay alert as we are awake.

To be aware. He uses the analogy of the fig tree. You know, when you go out in the spring, early spring, you begin to see the leaves bud and the trees.

I drove down the GW Parkway, which I love yesterday. And, you know, I forgot, I've forgotten the song, All the Leaves Are Brown. Who sang that? I forget.

[29 : 00] Who was that? Yeah, the mom's about, right. I just, I love that song. All the leaves are brown. And I found myself singing that again. And I love the, you know, I love the brownness, if you will.

But also, look forward to the time when spring will come again. And those beautiful leaves and trees will bud. And George, George Washington Parkway is absolutely gorgeous to drive down.

Jesus tells the story of the fig tree because he wants us to be aware of what's going on in the world around us. You know, the Bible, I know you all know this, I know Tommy and Dan have preached about this and spoken to it, that the Bible, the New Testament, uses two words for time, right?

We have, we have Kairos, Kairos time. Sorry, we have Kronos, I'm sorry. We have Kronos time. And then we have Kairos time, which is God's time.

And Kairos time is a moment in time, a special moment in time. And you know, if you missed, if you missed your Kronos, if you missed your flight, as I've done before, wait, open the door, please open the door.

[30 : 25] If you missed your Kronos time, you can probably book another flight. But if you miss Kairos time, which I almost did this summer, that was on a cruise when the ship set sail.

And when the ship is gone, brothers and sisters, it isn't coming back. So Kairos time is that time that is a moment that you don't want to miss.

Jesus tells us to be aware of the times in which we live. You know, I've done a bit of reflecting over this past few weeks and as we see just so much turmoil going on and just trying to step back from the news feed and all that's happening and seeing, you know, so much happening and just asking the question, Lord, what's going on here?

What's happening here? Lord, what's your take on all this? What's your perspective? How am I to understand this? And I think as we look and reflect on this passage and the world around us today, we see that there is division going on.

There's division between the races. There's a division between men and women, between the sexes. and the relationships. Clearly, in our experience, there's a great division between nations and we find division even at the heart of families and the relationships that we value the most.

[32 : 07] it's a critical time and to know the times in which we live is the first portion of being aware.

Being aware also means simply doing our duty. Simply doing our duty. A friend of mine used to say that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. To be about the great commission and the great commandment. Right?

Loving God and loving people. And how that works itself out in each of our unique circumstances and situations.

And looking for opportunities to share our faith. To communicate the hope that we have within us.

[33 : 10] And yet always always doing it with gentleness reverence respect. But we have an opportunity to tell people about Jesus who he is and why he means so much to us and what he's done for us.

And that they can have the same. I heard so many times I hear from sailors and soldiers and Marines and even some of our general officers some of our leading military figures that you know and I don't claim to have a great faith but they would say oh chaplain I wish I wish I had your faith. And my response to them is always you can. you can you can have the same faith the same trust the same experience simply doing our duty being faithful in the little being on guard it's not exciting it's often boring but it's essential.

and third to be to be aware is to stay connected to stay connected to Christ and his body. You know the great enemy of our soul one of the things that he wants to do without a doubt is to not only divide divide people and everything but he wants to isolate us he wants to isolate us from the body of believers from the church.

and so be very aware of the temptation to and especially if you're more of an introvert or you're dealing with difficult circumstances in your own life that there's always a temptation to become isolated and to move away from Christ and his church.

[35 : 07] But Jesus reminds us to stay connected to stay alert to stay aware. Well in this Advent season it's a season of preparation as Dan mentioned as we are singing about and will continue over the next four Sundays.

It's a season of preparation and yet we're told that ultimately everything will be swept away that in the second coming Christ will return.

Advent is for us in the church it is a unique spiritual tool from God's toolbox. you know one of the songs we read we sang rather the words came from St. Ambrose and from Martin Luther and Martin Luther described the human condition he said the heart the heart is like an idol factory I-D-O-L idol factory and Advent is God's righteous hammer to smash the idols of our hearts the idols of my own heart when my agenda my pursuits become so much more important than Christ and his work in the world and in my life.

Advent is a is a reminder it's a call it's a wake up call to all of us as believers. Now Advent finally can can leave us in these scripture readings today they may leave you feeling anxious or perhaps a bit fearful.

Maybe you discover that as I've done in the past that Lord I forgive me I often want what I want more than what you want and Lord I don't know how to I don't know how to I don't know how to let go of some of these things I don't I don't know how to want more of what what you want but I but I I

think I want that I do want that Jesus beloved wants us to be not only awake and alert but he also wants us to be unafraid unafraid now I am I am no hero far from it I was walking in the pentagon yesterday a Friday a Friday afternoon and there was someone there who I do not want to see I just I don't want to see him and that tells me that I probably need to see him

[37 : 53] I probably need to be reconciled with him if there's anything between us but I didn't want to see him and I was going to walk down a passageway that I might have seen him and I heard this scripture again this Mark chapter 13 be awake be alert but don't be afraid don't be afraid so I said Lord I'm not going to be afraid you're in charge you're in control if I run into him so be it and we'll deal with it then with your help but if not there'll be another time Jesus wants us to be unafraid and that's why he tells us ahead of time of what's going to take place he describes it as a man going on a journey a man going on a journey who puts his servants in charge of many things and leaves the watchman on guard in Mark chapter 13

Jesus tells us what is going to occur and he wants us to be unafraid in fact I love every year I saw at Djibouti which was just such a blessing I'm such a dope but I love it's a wonderful life I love that in the middle of the darkness in Djibouti in some really difficult times they decided to put that movie up on a big screen not a big screen a massive they portrayed it on some kind of wall or something so all of us could watch that movie it's a wonderful life and Joseph who's the angel in that movie he says the very same things that we find in scripture whenever

God's people are afraid whenever we have an encounter with the divine whenever we have a transcendent experience whenever an angel descends and speaks to human being what's the first response fear and you know what the word out of every angel that appears every angel says do not be afraid do not be afraid for behold I bring you great tidings great tidings do not be afraid often I've served half my career the marines and the marines before they go on a patrol or particularly if they're in a hostile environment and potentially will run into a firefight insurgents and combat marines and soldiers they will always almost without fail if their chaplain their unit chaplain is there they'll have that chaplain come kind of huddle with them and they'll want to have a prayer together and

I found that the marines will often ask me they said they call chaplains chaps and they say chaps can you can you give us a devotional thought can you give us a word something we can just take with us and I remember one of the marines as I recall asking you know hey chaps could you could you just distill the whole bible down for us and just you know a couple of big key points power points bullet points and I said okay guys here here's here's where we're at there are two great themes to the bible the first is that God loves you absolutely he loves you and because he loves you you can choose to trust him if you want to but the second great theme of the bible is equally true and just as poignant and that is this

I'm God and you're not you see beloved I believe this whole life this whole life's journey is part of its design to help us come to grips of the fact that there is a God who does love us and is in control and that no matter what happens you're ultimately safe with him but you know what I've also discovered you'll only trust a person to the extent that you know them the extent and all of life all of life is designed by a heavenly father who loves you dearly wants the best for you but he's designed life so that you and I will have opportunities to get to know him as I said Jesus Christ is all you need well you'll never come to know experience or perhaps even believe that until

[43 : 19] Jesus Christ is all that you have your past is forgiven your future is now secure in Christ and so you can experience his peace in the present moment your past forgiven your future secure you can experience his peace in the present moment finally I still love I must tell you I still love to visit New York City it is an amazing town and some of my dearest friends live there and it's quite a place and I still am awestruck by the buildings and the wonder of it all and every time I'm flying in and landing particularly at Newark if I've got a window seat on the left side of the plane and it's a landing from the northwest I know the flight pattern now I can look out the window and it's a clear day

I can see Manhattan and I'm a Chrysler building nut I love the Chrysler building and so at all my heart just skips a beat when I come into New York City and I can look over and just get a glimpse of the Chrysler building that Art Deco tower and maybe the sun is shining on it and has lit it up but I now I've come to know not as young boy but now as an older man that someday all of that will be swept away that as beautiful as it is as wonderful as it is as secure as it seems it's not going to last and it's not the place for me to put my hope in Mark's gospel twice the word schizo is used I

suppose it's where we get schizophrenic from but the schizo in the scriptures in the New Testament Greek means a tearing apart or a rendering separating a rendering so an opening can be made that word schizo is only used two times in Mark's gospel at the very beginning at the baptism of Jesus we're told that the heavens are schizoid or schizo they're opened the heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove the other time we're told that schizo is used is at the very end on the cross at the death of Jesus Mark tells us and he records that the curtain in the temple which separated everyone from the Holy of Holies that the curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom that the way of God is no longer to be found in a temple even a beautiful temple a beautiful structure made my man no longer will we find God in the temple we find God in a manger we find God on a cross we find God not here but in an empty tomb and together as Christians we say Christ has died Christ is risen and Christ will come again amen let's pray together shall we well Father in heaven Lord I know that I've covered a lot of ground and God I know that you've certainly touched my own life with this challenge at the beginning of Advent well the challenge Lord to turn my life over to you more and more as best I can with your help but also a comfort a comfort to know Lord Jesus that not only do you love me but my life is really secure in your hands and so we do say come Lord Jesus help us during the season of Advent to make a place hearts prepared for you and to welcome and receive you again we praise and bless you now and pray these things in your holy name amen