

“The Last Lecture of Jesus Christ”

Mark 13:24-27

Keep awake.

That’s one way to summarize the last lecture of Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Pausch delivered his final lecture in September 2007, after he had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. He showed a love of life and an approach to death that many people have found inspiring, and his lecture has turned into a phenomenon, viewed by millions on television and on the Internet. He went on to write a best selling book with columnist Jeffrey Zaslow titled *The Last Lecture*, a book about love, courage and saying goodbye. My son, Nathan, read his book while we were riding the bus between national parks last summer. Nathan commended the book to me.

On Friday, July 25, 2008, Pausch succumbed to cancer at the age of 47, just after our return from Utah.

He expected maybe 150 people to attend his last lecture. After all, it was a warm September day, and he assumed that people would have better things to do than attend a final lesson from a dying computer science professor in his 40s. He bet a friend \$50 that he would never fill the 400-seat auditorium.

Well, Pausch lost that bet. The room was packed, and when he arrived on stage, he received a standing ovation. He motioned the audience of students and colleagues to sit down. “Make me earn it, “ he said.

According to columnist Zaslow of *The Wall Street Journal* (May 3, 2008 and September

20, 2007), Randy hardly mentioned his cancer in the course of his 70 minute lecture. Instead, he took everyone on a rollicking and riveting journey through the lessons of his life. He talked about the importance of childhood dreams, and the stamina needed to overcome obstacles,. “Brick walls are there for a reason,” he insisted, showing slides of the rejection letters he had received over the years. “They let us prove how badly we want things.”

He pushed his audience to show patience toward others, saying, “Wait long enough, and people will surprise and impress you.” He celebrated his mentors and his students with an open heart, and revealed the depth of his love for his family.

Giving a nod to his techie background, Randy showed good humor. “I’ve experienced a deathbed conversion,” he said with a smile. “I just bought a Macintosh.” And wanting to show the crowd that he wasn’t ready to kick the bucket, he dropped to the floor and did one-handed push-ups.

Keep awake. That’s what Randy seemed to be saying as he invited his audience to rethink their ambitions and find new ways to look at other people’s flaws and abilities. Keep awake to what is truly important in life. After showing pictures of his childhood bedroom, marked up with mathematical notations he had drawn on the walls, he said, “If your kids want to paint their bedrooms, as a favor to me, let’em do it.”

Keep awake to what really matters. In this case it’s children – not bedroom walls.

After the lecture, Randy’s only plan was to spend his remaining days with his family. But a video of his talk began to spread like a virus across the Web. Randy was soon receiving e-mails from people around the world, telling him that his lecture had inspired them to spend

more time with loved ones, quit pitying themselves, and even resist suicidal urges. Terminally ill people were inspired to embrace their own goodbyes, and have fun with every day that they had left.

His last lecture really woke people up.

Then Randy gave part of his talk on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and ABC News named him one of its three “Persons of the Year.” People urged him to write a book, which he resisted at first, since he wanted to spend time with his family. But since he needed to exercise, and had to be alone as he rode his bike, he began to use his daily rides as a time to reflect on his lecture, his life and his dreams for his family.

And so, for an hour each day, he would talk to columnist Zaslow through a cell-phone headset, and over the course of 53 long bike rides he shared the insights that became the book called *The Last Lecture*.

Keep awake. That’s what Randy Pausch says to us, and what Jesus says as well.

The Last Lecture of Jesus Christ, given to the disciples only hours from his execution, is found in today’s reading, Mark 13. Of course it wasn’t a lecture and he wasn’t in a classroom, although, in those days, “classrooms” and “lectures” were rare. Conversations on a walk were the norm.

Still, it’s not a stretch to think of these words of Jesus as his last thoughts, his last “lecture” in which he challenges the disciples to keep awake for his second coming, and earth-shaking event which will occur at an undetermined time after his death, resurrection and ascension. He promises that he will return as the Son of Man, coming in clouds with “great

power and glory” to gather his people from the ends of the earth, and bring them into his kingdom (Mark13:26-27). The danger is that the disciples will miss what really matters, distracted by the many assorted demands and details of day-to-day life. So Jesus says to them, “Keep awake.” (v. 37).

We face the same challenge as we enter the season of Advent, and begin our march through the wild weeks of decorating, shopping, partying and concert-attending that lie ahead. Jesus is going to be coming to us soon – maybe not in an earth-shaking second coming, but in a personal arrival that’s every bit as important to each one of us. He’ll be coming to speak to us in words of Scripture that have eternal power – “Heaven and earth will pass away,” say Jesus, “but my words will not pass away” (v. 31). He’ll be coming to gather his people into a community that knows his everlasting salvation, a community stretching “from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (v. 27). He’ll be coming to see if we are alert and ready for his arrival, living in a way that is focused on his will and his way.

The challenge for us is to “keep awake” – awake for the coming of the Lord during this Advent season.

So how do we do this? We begin *by listening carefully to the words of Jesus*, words that can be hard to hear in the middle of the noise of the holidays. Randy Pausch took time to leave specific words of advice for his children, saying, “If I could give three words of advice, they would be, ‘Tell the truth.’ If I got three more words, I’d add, ‘All the time.’”

These are good words, but even better are the words of Jesus. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (8:34). We are called

to self-denial, even in this season of rich foods and expensive gifts. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” says Jesus (9:35). Glory and power are to be found in service to others, even as we focus on the fun and festivity of the holidays. “Truly I tell you,” promises Jesus, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (10:15). This emphasis on childlike faith is an important lesson to the ever-increasing anxiety of this season, in which we always seem to schedule more, do more, try more, buy more.

Receive Jesus, with childlike faith. In a very few words, that’s what Advent is all about.

It’s also important for us to *remain connected to the community* that Jesus intends to gather when he returns. Christian faith is a team sport, not an individual activity, so it’s critically important for us to continue to get together for worship, service, fellowship and fun. Randy Pausch continued to stay connected to friends throughout his illness – they joked around and made fun of each other, even in the face of death. On a short scuba-diving vacation, Randy put on sun screen and a friend said, “Afraid of skin cancer, Randy? That’s like putting good money after bad.”

In an over-scheduled holiday season, it’s tempting to skip worship and sleep in, or choose to head to the mall rather than a church meeting. But Jesus wants us to remain connected in community, where we will be awake to his arrival. “You do not know when the master of the house will come,” he predicts, “in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn” (v. 35).

Remain connected, in community. That’s the best position to be in, if you want to meet

Jesus Christ.

Finally, it's important for us *to be alert and ready for his arrival*, living in a way that is in line with Christ's will and way. "I am maintaining my clear-eyed sense of the inevitable," says Randy Pausch. "I'm living like I'm dying. But at the same time, I'm very much living like I'm still living."

Randy was wide awake, with a clear-eyed sense of the inevitable. We should be the same, living every day as though it were our last day on earth, doing our best to trust Jesus and love God and neighbor. Fact is, we don't know when our lives will end, just as we don't know the timing of Christ's second coming. The best approach is to be alert to Christ's will, living each day with faith and love and a spirit of service.

"What I say to I say to all," says Jesus; "Keep awake" (v. 37). These words come to us from the Last Lecture of Jesus Christ, like a message in a bottle that has traveled through the centuries to remind us of what really matters.

How to prepare for Advent? Receive Jesus, with childlike faith. Remain connected, in community. Live every day as though it were your last day on earth, in line with Christ's will and way.

That's the last lecture of Jesus Christ.

May the peace of God . . .

#256 - Comfort, Comfort Now My People