

“Hey! You in the back! Wake up!”

First Sunday of Advent – November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9 ~ 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 ~ Mark 13:24-37

I know it's hard to stay awake some Sundays. We stay up late on Saturday, we get up early on Sunday morning, and then all of a sudden, we stop and get still – our eyes get heavy, our breathing gets deeper, and before long we may start to doze. I don't like to see people snoozing in church. It's mainly jealousy on my part. If I can't sleep, you shouldn't get to either! But as much as I don't like people sleeping in church, it's people sleeping through life that really bothers me.

Every major spiritual tradition speaks of wakefulness ... alertness ... the quickening of the spirit to be mindful of God. We speak of conversion in terms of having our eyes opened ... of waking from sleep. In his book Awareness, Anthony De Mello insists:

Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they make love in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence. You know, all mystics ... no matter what their theology ... no matter what their religion ... are unanimous on one thing ... that all is well. All is well.

Though everything is a mess ... all is well. Strange paradox to be sure. But, tragically, most people never get to see that all is well because they are asleep. They are having a nightmare.

Jesus tried to give his generation a wake-up call. He tried to tell them that the sovereign God has everything in control. He tried to tell them that God was already in their midst. He tried to awaken them to the day that was coming when all would be revealed ... all would be completed ... all would be included in the dominion of God. He tried to remind them that the day was coming when they would all meet God. *“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake - for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly”* (Mark 13:33-36). In fact, Jesus extended this wake-up call right down to our generation when he added *“What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!”* (Mark 13:37). That “all” means you and me ... or as we say in Texas, all ya’ll! But it’s hard to wake up ... harder still to keep awake.

Some people don’t wake up to God because they don’t want to. They are addicted to their illusions that they are powerful and important ... that their stuff is of

ultimate value ... that their plans are of ultimate importance. Waking up would mean letting go of these illusions. Some people don't want to wake up to God because it would mean letting go of their fears and limitations and all of their excuses. Some people don't want to wake up to God because it would mean letting go of their security blanket and stepping out on faith ... letting go of their toys and growing up ... letting go of their crutches and walking on their own two feet with God.

Today we begin the season of Advent. Advent is all about God drawing near to us, or our waking up to the God who is already with us. Advent was one of the earliest "seasons" celebrated by the church, as a time of spiritual preparation for Christmas. They remembered that when God took on human flesh ... the eternal born into time ... almost nobody noticed. Even God's own people, who had waited centuries for the Messiah to come, weren't prepared when the moment came. The early church, recognizing this spiritual danger, set aside the weeks leading up to the celebration of Christmas as a time of training in readiness. Advent is a time of waiting, watching, preparing to meet God. Advent is a time for repentance, reflection, redirection, course correction. It is a season of spiritual focus.

The whole culture has an Advent season of sorts, and it's easy to replace the spiritual center of Advent with the sentimental saccharin of culture. One of my

favorite cartoons in the New Yorker depicts this man shopping in a department store. He's holding a teddy bear with a price tag on its toe: \$179.95. "Christ!" is his response in the balloon above his head. And the caption beneath reads, "Putting Christ back in Christmas." It's the same dilemma every year ... Christ or culture?

I suppose as serious Christians we try to participate in both. But you know in the competition between the cultural advent and the spiritual advent which one usually overshadows the other. What would it look like for us to choose the spiritual advent over this cultural advent ... to wake up from the sleep of just doing things the way we always have? What if we tried praying more? Tried praying every day? Tried praying every time we thought to pray? Tried keeping a journal? What if we ended every day by writing one page about where God met us in our day ... where we saw God at work in our waking hours? Read our Bible more or read some spiritual classics or some good theology or some thoughtful poetry. What if we talked about God with someone we respected ... listened as much as we spoke? Believe me, listening to the people around us ... really hearing what they're saying ... sensing what they're feeling ... considering what they are enduring ... is one of the best spiritual disciplines we could develop. What if in everything ... in everything ... we looked for the presence of God?!

These are not new ideas. These are not exercises that we don't know how to do, even if we're a bit out of practice. They're the basic stuff of Christian life, but you know how it is. We get distracted. We get inundated. Our good intentions get pushed to the side by competing demands. So, here's the challenge. In this season of special spiritual opportunity, say "no" to a few good things in order to take hold of the best thing. Make the time to give God your best attention for a change. You may be surprised that as you learn to wait for the Lord that you will discover that the Lord has been waiting on you.

Or you may just be surprised when your holiday season is interrupted by God and you meet the Lord in an unexpected ... unguarded ... perhaps even "apocalyptic" moment. You can't say you haven't been warned. The apocalyptic language of Mark seems outlandish to our modern ears. Jesus says, "*in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken*" (Mark 13:24-25). That sounds pretty bad, doesn't it? It sounds like science fiction or the esoteric mumbo-jumbo of some cult. Then again, maybe we can hear these apocalyptic warnings with new ears this year. This year has been a series of disasters in the world ... hurricanes, droughts, famine, firestorms and war ... just like every year. But this year has given of the bonus of the pandemic. There is no nation, no location that has been immune. Suddenly ... all of our wealth ... all of

our security ... all of our plans mean nothing next to the value of just being alive before God

And what about those disasters that come to us one at a time, and to all of us sooner or later? A company fails ... a strange lump grows ... someone crosses the yellow stripe in front of you ... and suddenly all your wealth ... all your security ... all your plans mean nothing next to the value of just being alive before God. If you aren't ready, the suffering is great and the loss is deep. If you are ready the suffering is still great and the loss deep ... but it is not total. And if you are alive to God ... God has a way of transforming suffering into salvation and loss into gain. If you are ready ... then all is well ... because you know all will be well. This is the faith that lets us face the uncertain, uncontrollable future with peace rather than anxiety

The story is told of the concert pianist who was about to begin a performance in a crowded concert hall when the silence was broken by a gasp from the audience. A child had escaped her parents and was running down the aisle. The pianist tried to keep his concentration, as the child bounded up the steps to the stage, sat down, and began to bang away on the piano with random, discordant notes. The audience murmured in irritation and embarrassment. But the pianist stopped, walked behind the child and reached around her ... placing his hands on either side of hers. He began to play in response to her notes, weaving an improvised melody out of her

discordant chaos. He received what she offered as a gift, awful as it was, and transformed into a harmony everybody enjoyed. That is what God does with what the world has to offer. And that is what God's people do with what the world offers us. Receiving "what is" as a gift ... by God's grace we help God transform it into "what might be."

Jesus expressed the emotion of what we may experience in the world – *"The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken"* – sometimes we feel that way, but that is not the last word. Jesus went on to say, *"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven"* (Mark 13:24-27). The last word belongs to God.

Is this passage good news or bad news? Well, it's bad news for those who don't see it coming. It's bad news for those who order their lives as if God were not involved and included and in charge. But it's good news for those who are ready ... who see it coming ... who have the vision to see God at work already. It's good news for those who have the imagination to expect a better world to come, and the good sense to order their lives according to the goals of God. The last word belongs to God, and the last word is good.

Then let us not be among those who sleep. Let us pity those who cannot see ... who fear to dream ... who settle for less ... who say “violence is a necessary reality” ... who put their trust in the things that rust and decay. But let us wake up to the constant work of the Spirit in our midst, and our future in God.

Wake up! Wake up and seek. All of you, in this season, wake up to the God who is coming to meet you. And let us get ready for Christmas. May we pray?

Eternal God,

We are mortal, temporal, and temporary. We wait for you ... watch for you ... long for you ... hope for you. Awaken our consciousness. Enervate our sensitivity. Energize our service. Prepare us for all the grace to come. Our faces turn towards your rising sun. Even, so Lord, come quickly. Amen.