

Waking up, keeping watch: A sermon for Advent 1, Year A

(Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44)

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A recent early-morning flight had me picking up fellow travelers on the Virginia Seminary campus at half past four. A few minutes later, as we crested the hill that opens up onto Arlington and the District, which were still beautifully lit against the darkness, one of my companions said, “I hate *getting up* this early, but I love *being awake*.”

If we’re to understand today’s readings properly—if we’re to understand this season of Advent—I think we need that 4 a.m. mindset.

Take a minute to get in touch with it: think back to that all-night study session in high school or college, to sitting vigil while awaiting a late-night childbirth, to watching the sky grow light on a chilly camping trip or an eternal third shift finally give way to the steady march of morning.

Yes, the dead of night can be a time of great frustration and loneliness, as all of us have experienced, some much more often than we’d like. But at its best, the chilly moonlight can illumine for us a dazzling facet of the human experience. When the Spirit is hovering in our midst, the dead of night comes alive with possibility.

Just ask Robert Frost, who wrote with longing, “These woods are lovely, dark, and deep, but I have promises to keep.” Or consider Jandy Nelson, who wrote of two fearless sisters that

sometimes in the pitch of night
they'd lie on their backs
in the middle of the path
and look up until the stars came back
and when they did,
they'd reach their arms up to touch them
and did

Or if we want to get right down to it, we can ask the writer of Psalm 130: “My soul waits for the LORD, more than watchmen for the morning, * more than watchmen for the morning.”

The point is that the darkness of night and early morning can be a time of clarity, of focus, of yearning—a time when our waiting reconnects us with the courage of our convictions. What distinguishes Advent from Lent is that in the later season we are called to turn around and repent; in this one, we are called to *wake up and keep watch*.

Listen to what Paul tells the Romans: “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for

you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

This is a call to alertness and action, to take up the practice of our faith with the focus and vigor of a promised new beginning. “[S]alvation is nearer to us now” because the God of our Salvation approaches. Jesus is coming, again. It is a matter of the greatest urgency.

And yet we don’t know exactly when it will happen. The morning has a way of sneaking up on us. That’s why we need to stay awake, as did the wise bridesmaids with their lamps. We sang about them in our opening hymn this morning, and we’ll visit their story in the closing hymn as well.

But for now Jesus tells us a different parable: “if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

The danger of our reflecting on the second coming of Christ, as we do every year on this Sunday, is to let this promised coming be a source of fear and dread. After all, the foolish bridesmaids do not enter the wedding banquet. And from today’s lesson, we hear: “two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.”

But these are parables about being alert. The stories include consequences, surely. But the intention isn’t to scare us, it’s to shake us out of our sense of complacency.

“I hate getting up this early, but I love being awake.”

Here again, our Advent imagery of light in the darkness is useful. These opening days of our new liturgical year are for sober, but ultimately hopeful, contemplation—on our lives and the place of our coming Lord within them. It’s 4 a.m. reality check time. That means matters are urgent but our surroundings calm. There is time enough for focus, there is still and quiet enough for us to see and hear things we otherwise miss.

I think the line between urgency and anxiety is razor thin, and the Spirit in the beginning of Advent beckons us right up to that line. The guiding light that keeps us from stumbling over the edge is Jesus himself, with those familiar words “do not be afraid.”

As the season opens before us, he is still and already shining out in the darkness, guiding us on the righteous path, redeeming us in the brightness of his resurrection, protecting us as our impenetrable armor of light.

The question for us isn’t so much “how can we avoid being caught off guard?” but “how can we respond in faith, hope, and love as the Morningstar rises in our hearts once more?”

That is our question for the week, how do we respond to Jesus shining in our hearts? There is

no place in our lives as individuals and as a community where we shouldn't ask this question, because there is no darkness that can overcome his light.

Let's think briefly about a timely example, the matter of our annual giving to St. Paul's. In the coming weeks, we'll be filling out pledge cards, making the commitment to give back to God. We do this out of our sense of gratitude, as Bishop Jim wrote so eloquently in the Epistle this month, and out of our sense of mission, as Fr. Shakespeare reminded us via email.

Thus, it is good for us to feel some urgency about our giving. It will affect how we are able to serve our neighbors near and far. It will affect our corporate life of worship and of welcome. It will affect our very souls, as God continues to teach us the painful but unavoidable lesson that to be truly free in this life is to learn to let go.

But my prayer is that all our deliberations about giving can take place against a spiritual backdrop of 4 a.m. stillness. We'll be tempted to fret about trendlines and bottom lines, comparing this year to last year and yesteryear. But they are the past. We'll be tempted to fear the worst about the year to come, about the changes and chances we cannot predict. But they are the future.

In our giving and in all our seeking and serving, may we remember St. Paul's admonition: Now is the moment for us to wake from sleep. Now is where where God's reality meets our response. Now is where we have our impact. The night is far gone; the day is near.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, help us to wait for your coming with urgency but without anxiety. Be for us our Light and our Salvation. *Amen.*