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Keep Awake

A sermon for the 1st Sunday of Advent, Year B

Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

December 3, 2017

Our first scripture reading today, from Isaiah—wow. We need James Earl Jones or the Rev. Jesse Jackson or one of the great British actresses like Maggie Smith or Judi Dench to read this for us so we don't miss out on all the emotion in this passage. "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" This is a cry of the heart from a time in Israel's history when they had been conquered by the Babylonians, their temple destroyed, the city of Jerusalem razed to the ground, their people taken into captivity. Basically, the people are saying, "God, show up! Show up in a way we can see and touch and understand. Do those mighty deeds like you did back when Moses parted the Red Sea." It's a word about how hard it is to trust a God we can't see—it's so much easier to trust the numbers in our bank account and portfolios, so much easier to trust military might and big walls, much easier to trust the stories and statistics that already support our cherished point of view.

It's also a word of humility. God, even though we can't see your face, and we don't know what you're up to in this situation, we are the clay, and you are the potter. Shape us the way YOU want, not the way WE want.

These words from Isaiah are a great gift, because they NAME our yearning for God to show up. Oh, that God would come down and destroy the stereo of my neighbor who plays his music too loud, or mute that dog that barks all night. Oh, that you would come down and strike everyone who has ever abused a child with a raging, burning STD that never lets them get a good night's sleep again. Oh, that you would come down and take all the people who throw litter out of their cars as they drive down the road, and all the people who abandon their pets, and all the

people who profit off of human trafficking, just take them all and throw them into a swimming pool full of sharks . . . oh, that you would strip away the wealth of those who profit at the expense of the poor, and make them live on food stamps for a year . . . and NOW would be great, God.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus speaks to our longing for God to show up, and says, essentially: God WILL show up. God always shows up. But God being God, you don't get to calendar this. You can't set the alarm, or make your reservation. But keep awake.

One day I drove to Salina for a meeting that involved lunch. I drove home that afternoon—it was a warm, sunny day, and I was full of pasta, bread, and other coma-inducing carbohydrates, and even though I had a diet Coke there in my cupholder, I struggled to stay awake. I found myself slapping my own face as I drove, so I wouldn't fall asleep. Whatever it took, because staying awake in that situation was a matter of life and death—not just for me, but everybody else on the road around me. For truckers, doctors, people in the military, air traffic controllers, pharmacists, and for that matter, everyone else, keeping awake means LIFE.

The first Sunday of Advent is always a little strange, because we begin not with the coming of Jesus as a human baby, the BIRTH of Christ, but with the Second Coming, when the risen Christ comes again. We live in an awkward time—Christ has died, Christ has risen, but Christ has not yet come again. And we don't know when he will.

Jesus says to keep alert or awake three times, and when Jesus says something three times in one teaching, I think that's a sign that he means it. What exactly does that mean?

First of all, keeping awake means keeping your eyes open. The very first children's book that Dr. Seuss ever wrote—anybody know what that was? It was published in 1937. And To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street, and it begins like this, “When I leave home to walk to

school, Dad always says to me, ‘Marco, keep your eyelids up and see what you can see.’” And the little boy wonders, “Now what can I say, when I get home from school today? All the long way to school, and all the way back, I’ve looked and I’ve looked, and I’ve kept careful track, but all that I’ve noticed, except my own feet, was a horse and a wagon on Mulberry Street.”

The little boy wants to tell a better story than that when he gets home from school, so he looks at that horse and wagon, as he walks home, he begins to imagine that the horse is really a zebra, and the wagon is a chariot, and the driver is a charioteer, and from there it grows and grows until finally he pictures a blue elephant pulling a big brass band, with giraffes, and magicians, and the mayor, and a police escort, and an airplane dumping confetti, and a man with a ten-foot beard walking along, and he says, “I had a story that no one could beat, and to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street!”

When Jesus says, “Keep awake,” he means, “Keep your eyelids up and see what you can see.” Don’t be afraid to look at the world. Don’t turn away from the tough stuff. Really look at people, at their pain, and loneliness, and heartache, and also look at their beauty and giftedness. Don’t stop looking at someone until you can see their beauty. Keep your eyes open, because there are little glimmers of the kingdom here and there, and you don’t want to miss them.

Don’t miss the wonder of people helping each other, and the sacrifice and bravery that humankind demonstrates at its best. Keep your eyelids up for what God is doing in the world and in your life right now, and remember that imagination, the ability to see new things and see old things in new ways, is also a gift from God. Keep your eyelids up, and don’t the great things God is doing in you.

Keeping alert and awake also has to do with being PRESENT. We don’t FORGET the past and we don’t ignore the future—but we let ourselves be fully HERE.

How many of us have had at least one thought since the worship service started about all the things you have to do today after worship is done? How many of us have snuck a peek at our phones? How many of us have just kind of zoned out and gone through the motions at some point? It's hard to be fully present, isn't it? We have to keep calling ourselves back to this moment, and this place, and these people, but there's great reward when we do that. Because this present moment is where life is.

Be present. Be present to people, be present to the tasks God has given us to do until Christ returns—if you aren't sure what those are, I respectfully refer you to last week's sermon-- be present to Christmas lights twinkling on houses and stores, and the taste of hot chocolate, and the sound of someone humming a Christmas tune. Be present to your dog or cat, and to the lonely relative who lives for your attention. Keep awake, and don't fall asleep to the gift of your own life.

Finally, keeping awake is a posture we take. I want you to try something with me if you are able, and if you can't, that's OK. Wherever you are seated, slouch. Let your shoulders slump, let your head hang down and your chin touch your chest, scoot down into your seat and let your legs slide forward.

And now, sit up straight. Put both feet on the floor, directly under you knees. Shoulders back a little bit, hands in your lap. Feels different, doesn't it? Which position allows you to get up and move more quickly? Which one allows you to easily turn your head to see what's happening around you?

To have good posture in a spiritual sense means our heart, soul, mind, and strength are aligned towards God. It means when we do wake up in the morning, hopefully after a restoring

and peaceful night's sleep, our first thought is, not what do I have to do today, but what does God want me to do today?

Keeping awake—keeping our eyelids up, keeping ourselves present, keeping our lives directed towards God—is not an easy task. There are ways to distract ourselves and numb ourselves out today that didn't even exist when Jesus uttered these words.

So for this first week of Advent, your invitation is to spend even just 10 minutes a day keeping awake. If you can't do ten, do 7. If you can do more, aim for 20. Spend this time meditating on a scripture reading or a devotional guide. We've given you a little guide in your bulletin, and I urge you to receive this gift and take it home today. After the reading, reflect, and pray, and just be attentive to what God has for you in that moment—7 to 10 minutes, at least 5 days this week. And remember that keeping awake means LIFE.