

1 Advent, Yr. A

November 27, 2016

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

On this first Sunday of Advent, of the new church year, the first sound we hear is the voice of the prophet Isaiah declaring, singing, really, in a solitary voice, of the time when God will restore the creation – singing of the time when all the “nations” will wake up and recognize that they need to learn and then walk in the ways of the Lord. And the second sound we hear, the sound that follows that waking up to the ways of the Lord is the welcome and glorious sound of hammering on metal as swords and spears, those instruments of death, are demolished and pounded into new shapes – now the shapes of ploughshares and pruning hooks, the instruments of life. And Isaiah goes on to say that God will judge between the nations, judging in the Biblical sense of putting everything right – and that means that all the reasons for greed and envy and hatred and resentment – they’ll all be gone and those weapons of war will be irrelevant. I’m sure you’ve all seen the figures of what the world spends on weapons; what would the world look like if those same enormous sums of money were available to be spent on education and health care, on providing basic needs so people could lead decent lives?

Paul, too, says that this is the moment to wake up. And waking up is the subject of this part of Matthew as well. Jesus paints a picture of the end of time, but also of our human tendency to complacency. He points to those people before the flood who were going about their ordinary lives, eating, drinking and marrying, unaware of what was coming. So stay awake, he says, be ready.

Every year at this time we hear these end-of- time readings. Advent seems like a season that’s a bit schizophrenic – we’re looking backward to the birth of Christ that occurred 2000 years ago and at the same time we’re being asked to look ahead to that end time when all the creation will be restored and God’s kingdom, which was inaugurated at Christ’s birth, is finally brought to fulfillment. But if you think about it, Advent gives us an accurate picture of where we are – in those in-between times – those times when the Kingdom has begun but is not yet completed. But knowing the beginning and the end, we can not only figure out where we fit in, but we can also understand where we’re headed and, therefore, how we’re to live. Paul and his contemporaries thought that the end times were just around the corner. But we, living all these centuries later, knowing that those predicted end times didn’t happen, find it much harder to stay awake – it’s easier to be complacent. There’s a fable about three apprentice devils trying to impress Satan with the temptations they’re going to set loose in the world. The first says he’s going to tell people there’s no God, but Satan brushes him off - that one won’t tempt anyone, he thinks. The second says he’s going to tell everyone that there’s no hell and Satan brushes him off as well. But the third one says, “I know what will work; I’ll tell people there’s no hurry.” And that one got Satan’s full approval. Because we DO live as if there’s no hurry, don’t we? As if we have all the time in the world? As if Tuesday will be just like Monday? And it is, until it’s not. This puts me in a mind of a NY cartoon that I like so much I saved it. It shows a fellow about to order from a fast-food cart, who looks up and sees a meteor heading for the earth. “Ah, on second thought,” he says, “I WILL have those fries!”

What does it mean to wake-up and live in the light? This question puts me in mind of an ethics class where a professor said that the first thing we have to do when confronted with an ethical question is to get the facts: to ask, what's really going on here. And that reminded me of one of the first philosophy classes I took. It was at a community college in Rhinelander and it was a social and political philosophy class. It met one evening a week for three hours. At the first session, the professor spent the first hour and a half talking about things like "weltanschauung" (or world view) and dialectical materialism. It was a bit overwhelming. And then, at the break, one person raised their hand and said, "Could you tell me – is this the class on musical appreciation?" So – what's really going on? We need to find out which class we're in. So for the Christian, what's really going on? We're surrounded with the messages of the culture: that what's really going on is that we live in a dog-eat-dog world, that a fulfilled life means having the most toys in the end, or surviving because I'm the strongest and the best, or living in a way that means I'm NO. 1, looking out for myself alone, thinking my fellow humans are there for my pleasure or my use or my exploitation. But waking up to God means recognizing that the world's trying to sell us a bill of goods. Waking up to God and learning God's ways means that we come to understand that all things are moving towards love and justice, towards God setting the creation right. Waking up and walking in God's light means coming to see and understand that each person is made in God's image and is precious and loved; that God's presence is real; that God can be trusted; that healing and reconciliation and love are real possibilities and not just some kind of pie-in-the-sky dream.

Are we asleep? And, if so, what wakes us up? In some ways we're like the folks in the gospel – we're caught up in the busyness of daily life. But there's more, I think. I know I've mentioned Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* before. His argument is primarily about public conversation and it certainly was true in this past election – both in the quality of the rhetoric but also in that new phenomenon of social media being used, often to spread misinformation, confusion and downright lies. But his argument is also applicable to our spiritual lives – he contends that we have become focused on entertainment and distraction to the detriment of pretty much everything else. He laments that we don't want to engage in serious study or conversation – in fact, we try to escape it. I suppose part of what's going on is the recognition that if we DO wake up to the condition of our world and what God is calling us to, that means that we're going to have to get serious about thinking through our own vision, our own lifestyles, our obligations – that's not only a lot of work but it will most probably call for change, which is hard to do. So it's easier, and certainly more comfortable, just to stay asleep.

But I think most of us, at some time in our lives, are placed in a situation that almost forces us to wake up. It's usually when things fall apart and "business as usual" no longer works. I read a piece about a Jesuit priest, Alfred Delp, who was executed by the Nazis in 1945. He wrote that we won't be able to see clearly, to "get to the bottom of things" until we let go of our false securities and illusions. Writing from prison, he says, "All right, it was night, but now it's day...time to wake up, to put things back where the Lord God put them. Go to work, set our lives in order...."And pray for clear eyes that will enable us to see God's messages of annunciation and for awakened hearts that will give us the wisdom to hear God's words of promise....

And then there's the story about a highly successful film maker who had an accident, falling from his bike and suffering a post-concussive infirmity that was so severe that he began to rethink all of life's deepest questions. His conclusion was that the reality is that we're all in this together and we need to live cooperatively and with care for one another. His waking up to this new way of looking at things meant a major life change for him. He gave up his private jet and then sold his 17,000 square foot house in Pasadena and moved into a trailer park in Malibu. He took the money that freed up to build a shelter for the homeless and to fund the rescue of child soldiers in Africa. He said that he feels like his accident was a providential course correction. "I think the bike accident knocked me into my heart," he says. When he talks about how he's now living, he says that he's living this way because it's so awesome. At one point he talked with a freed slave from Ghana and, in response to that conversation, took some of his money and bought the former slave a boat so he could go and rescue others. "Now, c'mon," he says about this, "it would take a heck of a Maserati to beat that!" He's working on a new film that he hopes, in his words, "will split the sack and say to others, stick your head out and look." A kind of hip way of saying WAKE UP! I think.

Our waking up probably won't be as dramatic as his. So what do WE do? How do we live in this in-between time? How do we translate that vision of the coming Kingdom into our daily lives? Perhaps by small daily acts of awareness and love. Maybe by reconciling with an enemy. Or by telling someone you love them, or by giving something away with no thought of return. By opening ourselves to the movement of the spirit – by allowing the Spirit to "knock us into our hearts." And then going wherever the spirit leads us. Amen.