

## Keep Awake

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

This year has been tumultuous for our nation. COVID pandemic, protests, and vigils are occurring all over the country. Social unrest prompted people to cry out saying, “Black lives matter!” Political, racial, economic division has brought us to a tipping point. We recognize that this is not how things should be. Communities across the US are struggling with poverty, with discrimination and marginalization by social institutions like the police or the courts. There is anger and sadness. There are many opinions, thoughts, and emotions - and many prayers too. My prayer has been this: “God, bring change. Bring justice and wholeness. Transform this situation. Heal the wounds of prejudice and show us how to work for the peace and well-being of all people.”

The emotions of this past year, the cries for change and justice, may not seem to be very Christmas-y to you, but they have everything to do with Advent. Advent, as you probably know, is the season before Christmas. But it isn't a season defined in Scripture by gift-buying or decorating. Advent is a season of yearning, of longing for God to intervene, to give hope, to deliver from evil, to bring salvation and redemption, and to make violence and injustice cease. Advent is a time of awakening, when God's people become alert to their own spiritual needs - and awake to the needs of the world around them. It is a time when Jesus calls us to “Keep awake,” to keep focused on bringing the light of Christ into our world.

Both of our Old Testament passages share a sense of *yearning*: yearning for God's presence, for God's redemption, for God's favor to shine upon His people once more. When we meet the prophet Isaiah in chapter 64, he is imploring God to act. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” he cries. “Rip open the sky and come down to us. Be near to your people. You have done awesome things in the past, delivering your people from slavery in Egypt. We need you to do something astounding again.”

During Isaiah's time, the people of Israel and Judah were suffering from the consequences of their own injustice and idolatry. The two divided Kingdoms had each failed to listen to the LORD's teachings through Moses (the Law) or to the prophets. The people of Israel and Judah had stopped loving God and loving their neighbors. Instead, they oppressed the weak and marginalized. The people went through religious rituals but failed to live out the LORD's ethic of concern and well-being for all people, regardless of ethnicity or wealth. The people of Israel and Judah had broken their part of the covenant with Yahweh and so they lost the protection that the LORD gave. The northern Kingdom was taken into exile first, followed by the southern Kingdom of Judah during Isaiah's time. Foreign armies came in, destroyed their lives as they knew it, and forcibly carried the people away to Babylon.

Isaiah's prayer comes at a time when God's people had reached a breaking point in exile. Their suffering made them recognize their own brokenness and desolation. The people confronted their sins and saw their own failings at goodness and mercy. Isaiah's prayer describes this in verses 6 and 7: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you" (vv. 6-7).

Without looking to the LORD for their righteousness, without caring for the needs of others, the community of faith faced destruction, turmoil, and hopelessness. Hitting rock bottom, God's people woke up to the fact that they needed the LORD to bring life, to bring light to the dark places of their lives, to transform their hearts.

We see this at the end of Isaiah's prayer. We are sinful and broken, Isaiah says, "Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people" (vv. 8-9). Isaiah and the Israelites asked God to be merciful, to make right relationships with God and with each other, and to renew them on the path to righteousness.

Advent is a special time in the church calendar, a time when the calendar resets, starts over. It is the official beginning of the new church year. We move from the ordinariness of the everyday after Pentecost (a season that is actually called "ordinary time") and we come to Advent, where we focus on the coming of Jesus. Before Jesus' birth, people were eagerly waiting for the LORD to act, to tear open the heavens and come down, to intervene, reveal, and transform. In Advent, we mark the time when our spiritual ancestors cried out for God's intervention in their lives, when they sought God's salvation and deliverance. For us, Advent is about walking in their footsteps and waking up to the need for God in our lives and in this world.

No matter how hard we try, we cannot live a righteous, loving life on our own. Like Isaiah wrote, all of our best works of righteousness fall short when we bring them on our own strength; they are piles of filthy rags, deeds with mixed motivations. It is only by the grace of God - by the power of the Holy Spirit - that we can offer up love, goodness, patience, reconciliation, and peace.

Advent is a time to seek the dark places in our lives and in this world and to ask for God's light to shine in the darkness. Where are the dark places in our lives, in our church, in community, or our nation, where we need God's light to shine? Are we worshipping God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Is our worship accompanied by love, humility,

kindness, and justice? Advent is a time for us to wake up: to examine our hearts and the world around us and to open up the dark places for God's light to shine.

Our gospel text this morning reminded me of a strange portion of Brethren history. It is well-preserved in the town of Ephrata, in Lancaster County. The Ephrata Cloister is the historical home of a Brethren splinter branch. Conrad Beissel was part of the early Brethren and, for a time, he was leader of the Conestoga congregation. His theological views on the necessity of Saturday worship and celibacy led him to break away and seek a life of secluded spirituality. Many followers were drawn to him and a community was formed. Cloistered celibates lived together in monastic-like community, while married "householders" lived apart and worshipped with the celibates.

In addition to teachings of celibacy, Saturday worship, and monastic simplicity, another distinction of the Ephrata community is that they lived in eager expectation for the return of Christ. Every night at midnight, sisters and brothers would rise from sleep and gather to pray and "watch" for Christ's return. They took very seriously Jesus' teachings about watching for the Day of the Lord (Matt. 24:42-44) and Paul's words that Jesus would return "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2). Since the Cloister Brethren thought that thieves were most likely to come around midnight, the community watched and prayed each night from midnight until 2 am. If Christ did not return, the sisters and brothers would return to sleep.

Our gospel text in Mark is part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, shortly before His crucifixion. Jesus says that He is going to leave but that He will come back—and the disciples need to be ready. Using apocalyptic language, Jesus describes the final fulfillment of God's Kingdom. Like other apocalyptic passages in the Bible, the images are not exactly clear because they are figurative illustrations.

While parts are fuzzy and dramatic and difficult to interpret, Jesus' main point is crystal clear. It isn't about knowing the details, predicting dates, or having a precise timeline of what will happen and when. Instead, Jesus says, "No one knows when the Son of Man will return. It is kind of like a master going on vacation and leaving his servants in charge. They all have tasks and have work to do. The servants do not know when the master will return, so they need to keep on working like it could be the next day, the next hour, or the next minute" (paraphrase, vv. 32, 35-36). Jesus' tells his disciples to "keep awake" because there is work to do.

The Cloister Brethren took this message very seriously - they literally kept awake each night. We find this a bit strange and too literal for our modern tastes. So what do we actually do with Jesus' instruction? Some Christians focus so much on the end times that they don't look at the present. Looking so far forward, they forget about proclaiming the Kingdom of God "on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Other Christians get a little queasy when looking at Mark 13 because it has themes of judgment and alludes to the culmination of history. Some Christians try to ignore this passage and just focus on the present, on the power that God gives us today, rather than looking ahead to Jesus' Second Coming. Yet neither of these approaches appear biblical.

How do we take this text seriously? The Cloister Brethren saw that Jesus was giving serious instruction and they tried to pay attention to the coming of Christ. Though we are not necessarily called to be awake from midnight to 2 am, we are called to "Keep awake!" Jesus' instruction to the disciples extends to us all of us. In verse 37, Jesus says, "What I say to you I say to all: keep awake" (Mk. 13:37).

What does it mean to keep awake? We are called by Jesus to keep focused on the work that the Master has left us in charge of. Jesus didn't leave us alone, without any power, without His presence, or without the tools to do the work. The apostle Paul highlights this in our 1 Corinthians passage. "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge...Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." (1 Cor. 1:4-5, 7). God has sent us the Holy Spirit. He has given spiritual gifts to each of us, in order to continue Jesus' work in this world. God's redemption is a continuous process in our lives and in this world. We, sisters and brothers, are called to keep this redemption work going.

Advent marks a time when God's people yearned for wholeness, for justice, for salvation and redemption - and it marks the time when God answered and acted in a mighty way. The LORD Himself came down to live and walk among us, to show us how to live, to redeem us from our sins, and to bring us to new life. Jesus lived, taught, served, healed, transformed, suffered violence, died, and rose again - so that this world could be made new. Advent is a time when we *wake up* to the brokenness in our hearts and in this world, when we take up our calling to sow seeds of redemption and restore this world, our hearts, and our lives, to the way that God intended.

Jesus calls us to continue His work. He says, "Keep awake." Be faithful servants focused on the Master's return. This faithfulness is not a burden that we bear on our own. He has promised to be faithful and to see us through...if we seek His strength. Our 1 Corinthians passage closes with this promise, "He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (v. 8-9).

Jesus calls us to wake up to the need for God in our lives and in this world - and to keep awake, continuing God's mission. We are called to seek the God who made us, to work in this world to bring light to the dark places. How is God calling you to keep awake this Advent? Is He calling you to seek spiritual strength and growth in His presence, through scripture and prayer? Is He calling you to share the love and message of Jesus' salvation with others? Is He calling you to extend the love of God through this neighborhood and this city? Is He calling you to bring healing and justice to relationships, to neighborhoods, to our city, to this country and world? Sisters and brothers, wake up to your need for God's presence in your life. Dear sisters and brothers, keep awake - and work to continue the redemption of God in this world. AMEN.

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Hatfield Church of the Brethren