

A Wakeful Faith on First Advent

Isaiah 64:1-8, Mark 13:28-37 by Patty Friesen (Dec 3/17)

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the church year in the Gospel of Mark. While we like to think about the soothing gospel texts heralding the first coming of Christ as a baby, the gospels insist on the rousing second coming of Christ as king and the shaking of the heavens. Jesus is describing a new world order where a new ruler comes to power, the Son of Man comes in clouds with great power and glory. This would have been a word of comfort for the early Christians, a word of rescue from their suffering and the promise of a new world order where Christ is in charge – not the earthly principalities and powers of the Roman military empire.

“Therefore, keep awake-for you do not know when the master of the house will come at one of the four watches of the night; in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow, or at dawn.” Ched Meyer’s commentary on Mark’s Gospel ties this parable to the passion of Christ where the Last Supper took place at evening, Jesus was arrested at midnight, Peter betrayed Jesus at cockcrow and he was crucified at dawn. This parallel between the keep awake text and passion of Christ is convincing, as in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus tells the disciples to... Watch and keep awake... as in this poem titled Gethsemane by Mary Oliver.

The grass never sleeps. Or the roses.
Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.

Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.

The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet,
And it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body,
And heaven knows if it ever sleeps.

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe

the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move,
 maybe
The lake far away, where once he walked as on a
 blue pavement,
lay still and waited, wild awake.

Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not
keep that vigil, how they must have wept,
so utterly human, knowing this too
must be part of the story.

Ched Meyers says we are always living in Gethsemane, the world is Gethsemane, a place of loneliness, darkness and suffering and we are exhorted to stay awake in the darkness, through the four watches of the night because anything can happen at anytime to change the course of history. Mark calls the discipleship community to live in history with open eyes, to look deep into present events, beyond the conflicting claims of those vying for power. The coming of the kingdom of God has nothing to do with triumphalism; it comes from below, in solidarity with the human family in its dark night of suffering. The world is Gethsemane, and we are called to historical insomnia, to stay wide-awake throughout history.

And yet the disciples fall asleep in Gethsemane and so do we. The early Christian monastics described this spiritual sleepiness as the noonday demon, which attacked the monk in the middle of a long and weary day, tempting him to fall asleep or tempting him to restlessness and discontent. Acedia means apathy or indifference, literally, I don't give a rip. Acedia is a state of the soul-diametrically opposed to mindfulness and attentiveness and wakefulness—marked by exhaustion, listlessness, sullen lethargy, a sense of futility. My guess is that many of us find ourselves in this state of spiritual lethargy and sleepiness - none of us is immune to its dangers.

The traditional monastic remedy for spiritual lethargy was work, and prayer. Work advocated by the monastic tradition was not busywork or a drive toward productivity, but a quiet resolve to stay with the job at hand, to remain present and faithful to what must be done – which creates contemplativeness and meaning in our tasks. Reclaiming a sense of the real value of the choices we have made about the way we spend our days might help us derive a new depth of satisfaction from our work. We might also come to see more clearly the difference between what is really worth our time and what is not.

We might even rediscover the beauty, the hidden sacramental significance, beneath the surface of even the most mundane activities. One we begin to bring, in the words of the prayer book, greater “singleness of heart” to our work, whatever it is, we are well on the way to defeating acedia. Doing the kind of work that can help us stay awake, stay present to God and faithful to our promises, even in the heat of the day, the stagnation of midlife, will not necessarily involve changing jobs and adding tasks to our already over-scheduled days. Rather, understanding that our real work, no matter how we earn our livelihoods, engages us in saying yes to God, can keep the demons of listlessness and sadness at bay, can help us stay faithful and present.

Prayer can be a remedy for lethargy only if we experience prayer not as a dutiful form of words but as a living reliance on God, a profound trust in God’s love and purposes. In this kind of prayer, we reset our spiritual compasses to true north. The exhaustion and restlessness of acedia keep us shallow and off center; in prayer we return to the center; which is why our 9:15 Sunday prayer time is called centering prayer. In

this kind of prayer, we remember who and whose we are. We learn to awaken to what really matters.

Perhaps the most important gift of the Christian monastic life is that of imposing a framework of prayer on the pattern of daily life. Muslims also know this framework of prayer 5 times throughout the day. That framework of prayer starts in the dark, in the hours before dawn. Its Christian name “Vigils,” is significant, for it is the daily call and commitment to be vigilant, awake, aware, alert. Praying through that predawn time becomes a symbolic enactment of the movement from dark to light, from sleep to being awake, from death to new life.

A time of silence in the morning, even a very short time, means starting the day by paying attention. Making a conscious effort to be present to the God who is present to me, lays the necessary foundation for the day that lies ahead. Those of us outside the monastic enclosure require practice, and like any other art, the practice of being present to God, must be fostered: “the art of awareness of God, the art of sensing God’s presence in our daily lives cannot be learned off-hand.” It is the practice of seeing with total attentiveness, with delight, with wonder, with love and with reverence.

Poet Mary Oliver says, “I don’t know exactly what a prayer is, but I do know how to pay attention.” Paying attention to what is beautiful, what is real and alive, what is wild and precious is itself a kind of prayer. The best pray-ers I know are the poets, Mary Oliver, Jane Kenyon, Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, those who are attentive, who hold the world under a magnifying glass that we may see its wonder and beauty. Learning to pay awe-struck attention to Creator and creation will do much to keep us wild awake, as Oliver says, to keep our lives anchored in God’s mysteries.

Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese hears God as a Grandmother waking him up. Richard: Grandmother, what is the point of all this worship, this prayer, these spiritual disciplines? Grandmother: To awaken from the dream. Richard: What dream is that? Grandmother: The illusion that what we see is all there is, that this physical world is the real one. Richard: Are there higher dreams then? Grandmother: Yes. Dreams of unity over aloneness, blessings over fear, freedom over blame, unlimited spiritual possibility over limited material gain. Richard: You're telling me all that is possible? Grandmother: I'm telling you to choose to awaken. All is possible once you do that. (Embers.110)

So let us awaken and arise these next weeks of Advent. "Seek wakefulness first in your own home. Go at night into the darkened room of your sleeping child and breathe with the moist, quick rising of a child's breath. Rise in the thin light of a new day. Do not turn on a lamp or the television or the coffee maker, but stand by an east window. Listen next for stillness as you venture out of doors. Find it in the first cape of snow draped over the eaves of your house. Turn finally to your own heart. The same stillness is there as well. In that primordial stillness beats the heart of God." (Wendy Wright, Vigil, p. 15)

Let us pray: "Stir up our hearts, O God we beseech you, to prepare ourselves to receive your Son. When Jesus comes and knocks, may he find us not sleeping in Gethsemane but awake to righteousness, ceaselessly rejoicing in his love. Amen.