

“Stay Awake”  
Matthew 24:36-44  
Sunday, November 28, 2010  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

Writes Leonard Sweet:

“Here is a sure-fire, Advent season test to determine how old you are.

“Is time now rushing past you faster than you can imagine?

“Or is time creeping and crawling along, slowly dragging on its belly, torturing you with its puny progress?

“If you’re a child, Advent is an eternity, a seemingly endless stretch of December days and waiting for Christmas.

“If you’re an adult, especially a normal, hurried, harried adult, the four short weeks of Advent leave us breathless -- not with anticipation, but with exhaustion.

“Time is relative. If you don’t believe me, believe Albert Einstein, who didn’t like the phrase ‘everything is relative,’ but enjoyed playing with it, like in this explanation of relativity to a reporter: ‘An hour sitting with a pretty girl on a park bench passes like a minute,’ Einstein quipped, ‘but a minute sitting on a hot stove seems like an hour.’ ”

Advent is a season in which Christians watch and wait, anticipating the birth of Christ in our hearts, expecting the return of Christ in the flesh.

Advent is a strange time when juxtaposed alongside the secular celebration of Christmas.

## **I. Stay awake – inwardly.**

Our scripture reading from Matthew seems like a strange text for Advent. It isn't about a cute little baby who is about to be born. It isn't about shepherds and angels and kings and camels. It's about the flood of Noah's time, and the drowning of those who were unprepared. It's about a kidnapper who sees two men in a field – or two women grinding meal – takes one of each pair, and leaves the others behind. It's about a thief who comes in the night, at an hour when the owner of the house does not expect him.

This is scary stuff. A God who arrives like a devastating flood, a Messiah who is like a choosy kidnapper, a Savior who is like a thief in the night – these are jarring images when compared with the baby Jesus we are planning for Christmas.

James T. Garrett focuses on Jesus' reference to Noah in today's scripture reading:

“In the Book of Genesis we find the story of Noah. There had been endless days on the ark... days of waiting and hoping. In every direction Noah could see only water. One day, in faith, he released a dove to search for land. The Bible says the dove ‘found no place to set her foot’ and returned. Noah was put on hold. He had to wait. He waited with faith and in hope.

“He sent out a dove a second time. It returned with a spring of freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak. Noah could not see the land, but he knew it was there. It began to appear out of the watery waste. The worst was over. As sure as God made little green apples, a new, green world would emerge out of the wreckage of the old.

“In Christ we find a freshly plucked olive leaf pointing toward a day when all tragedy shall be overcome and all pain destroyed. A new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. A new kingdom will emerge. This is our faith. This is the mood of Advent.”

William G. Carter captures “the mood of Advent” with this story:

“The door slammed. There was a rush upstairs. The man looked at the clock; it was time for his daughter to be home from school. Fourth grade was not going very well, and from the sound of the slam of the door, it had not improved.

“He went up to her room and asked about her day. ‘It was awful,’ she said, and then she filled in the details. When she unzipped her backpack at school, her homework was nowhere to be found. Her normally charming teacher snarled at the class. The morning dragged on to lunch, when none of the cafeteria choices looked appetizing. The class went outside to the playground and her best friend decided to play with somebody else. To top it off, a big kid named Kevin had made fun of her on the bus.

“‘It was a rotten day,’ she sobbed, and he held her. After about ten minutes, she stopped quivering. He rubbed her back and she blew her nose. One more hug, and then he went downstairs.

“About a half hour later, he thought it sounded unnaturally quiet, so he sneaked upstairs to see what was happening. To his surprise, she was down on her knees with her hands clasped and her eyes shut, and she was murmuring something.

“‘Honey,’ he said, ‘is everything all right?’

“‘I’m okay, Daddy, I’m just praying.’

“‘That’s good,’ he whispered. ‘What are you praying for?’

“‘Dad, I’ve decided I don’t like this world, so I’m praying for a new one.’

“Whether she knew it or not, cute as she was, she was rooting herself in thousands of years of Christian tradition. Ever since Jesus appeared among us, Christians have been praying for a whole new world.”

That's what our scripture reading alludes to today. Looking forward in time to a new world, when Christ returns.

Advent is a strange time. The way time behaves in Advent is strange. As the world celebrates presents and Christmas trees and Christmas decorations, Christians watch and wait and prepare for Christ's return. We struggle to stay awake, spiritually.

This is a subtle process, the work of remaining spiritually awake.

Richard A. Wing writes in his book, Deep Joy for a Shallow World, about a bumper sticker he saw which read, "Happiness is an inside job." Writes Wing, "I'm here to tell you that Advent is, too. What happens on the exterior is cosmetic and delightful but has limitations. What happens on the interior will occur when we choose to allow God to do something within us. That something has eternal value."

An awareness of Advent time is difficult to maintain in our frantic consumer-based culture.

A symbol of how far Christmas has been taken over by secular society is the length of the season. Until the fourth century, the Church did not officially observe a Christmas holiday. There was a forty day winter version of Lent which went from November 11 to January 6. Everyone would fast and repent, preparing for the baptisms to take place on January 6, Epiphany.

Christmas wasn't really celebrated by the church until the sixth century. Winter Lent was shortened to four weeks and called "Advent" which means "coming." Purple, a penitential color, was retained for the season, which became a time of subdued, reflective joy.

While the Advent season was shortened by the church, the secular season of Christmas has been lengthened and lengthened to allow for more shopping days. We now have two

months, from Halloween to Christmas eve, in which to be bombarded by Christmas commercialism.

Santa Claus, as we all know, is commercialized as much as every other symbol of the season.

It was not always that way. The original “St. Nicholas” was a popular figure in the Eastern Orthodox Church, where Christians used to commemorate his feast day, December 6, by secretly giving presents to others in need. Today Santa Claus is not even considered to be a religious element of Christmas. City halls won’t allow manger scenes or Hanukkah candles, but Santa and his eight tiny reindeer are welcome at any civic event.

## **II. Stay awake – outwardly.**

Reinhold Niebuhr, a famous theologian, wrote a familiar prayer called “The Serenity Prayer.” It goes like this:

God grant me the serenity,  
To accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.

The prayer continues, with a less familiar stanza:

Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.  
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will.  
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,

And supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

Writes Brett Blair, "...it conveys an attitude I like very well. On many occasions I absolutely refuse to accept people I know I have no possibility of changing. On other occasions I don't have the courage to root out some sin from my life. Why? Cause I don't wanna'. And wisdom? Well, you know very well that's in short supply. The more I can adopt the attitude of the serenity prayer the more ready I know I will be for His coming.

"But unfortunately many of us are like the elderly lady who in jest posted on her door in the retirement village the 'Senility Prayer':

" 'God, grant me the senility to forget the people I've never liked, the good fortune to run into the ones that I do like, and the eyesight to tell the difference.' "

To stay awake spiritually includes not only attending to our inward thoughts and emotions, but also attending to our outward relationships. Advent time calls us to "stay awake" as we interact with our friends, our families, and the world. This is more than a full-time job; it is a lifetime vocation – to attend consciously to the people and the world around us.

In their book, Resident Aliens, William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas tell the story of a rabbi in Greenville, South Carolina, a friend, who used to challenge the values of the society around him by telling his children, "that's fine for everyone else, but it's not fine for you. You are special. You are different. You are a Jew. You have a different story. A different set of values."

In our scripture reading, Jesus reminds us that Christians, too, have a different story, a different set of values. And he reminds us that the Lord ought to be at the heart of all we do. For he may surprise us at any moment, entering our hearts this Christmas like a flood or a kidnapper or a thief...or maybe even like a little baby.

Jesus gives us some helpful hints on how to avoid missing the joy of the Lord's return. He offers two requirements for believers. These requirements apply to the Advent season and beyond.

First and foremost believers are required to know and confess the Lord. Says Jesus, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." He is our Lord; we are to be awake, alert, and ready to meet him.

The second requirement for believers is to live expectantly in obedience to God's will and God's righteousness. To live expectantly means to eagerly anticipate God's action in our lives. To live in obedience means to continually seek to know God's will and to live accordingly.

During this Advent season, then, Christians ought to stand out as those who are keeping watch for Christ's return. Our first goal ought not to be to get our shopping done or to get our Christmas cards mailed. Our first goal ought to be to keep both the season of Advent and the season of Christmas holy.

How we do this is subtle and individual. To stay awake spiritually is, in one sense, simple and easy. In another sense, it is the hardest work we do.

### **III. Stay awake – spiritually**

C. S. Lewis, theologian, and author of the Narnia stories, writes of a moment of anxiety felt by his wife, Joy:

"Long ago before we were married, [Joy] was haunted all one morning as she went about her work with the obscure sense of God (so to speak) 'at her elbow,' demanding her attention. And of course, not being a perfected saint, she had the feeling that it would be a question, as it usually is, of some unrepented sin or tedious duty. At last she gave in -- I know how one puts it

off -- and faced Him. But the message was, 'I want to give you something' and instantly she entered into joy."

Sometimes, the spiritual work of staying awake has to do with facing our deepest fears about ourselves. All year 'round, and especially at the holidays, we seek ways to avoid our most painful realities. We run away from our griefs and our sorrows, our shortcomings and our sins.

This version of the 23rd Psalm, from Japan, appears in the book, Mother Teresa, Life in the Spirit, edited by Kathryn Spink:

The Lord is my pace setter . . . I shall not rush

He makes me stop for quiet intervals

He provides me with images of stillness which restore my serenity

He leads me in the way of efficiency through calmness of mind and his guidance is peace

Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret, for his presence is here

His timelessness, his all importance will keep me in balance

He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity by anointing my mind with his oils of tranquility

My cup of joyous energy overflows

Truly harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours for I shall walk in the Pace of my Lord and dwell in his house for ever.

This Advent time – the Lord's pace – is something most adults long for during the holidays. And yet it is so difficult to find, with all the demands we place on ourselves and each other.

**Closing.**

A. N. Wilder writes a poem about Christ's coming, entitled "Grace Confounding":

He came when he wasn't expected  
as he always does,  
though a few on the night-shift had  
the release early.

He came where he wasn't expected  
as he always does,  
though a few Magis were tipped off  
...he is always one step ahead of us.

Christ will come this Christmas, at an unexpected time, in an unexpected place, as he always does. Let us stay awake and keep watch for him together.

Amen.