

Today the Church begins a new liturgical year together. Not just Episcopalians, but Christians around the world—Roman Catholic and Orthodox and Lutherans and Methodists and many others all take these four Sundays to prepare our hearts and minds and souls to celebrate Christmas. We make time to wait, and to be still in the presence of God. I love just about everything about the season of Advent: the wreath and the candles and the color of the vestments. But mostly I think what I love the most is that in a world of instant gratification it is a somewhat counter-cultural act—even maybe a small act of defiance—to light these Advent candles one at a time and to wait patiently.

In Advent (as in every season of the Church year) we look to restore a sense of balance in our lives and to get our priorities straight. The challenge of finding that sense of balance in the month of December is that it is so easy for us to lose our way. We can forget why it is that family and friends matter so much when we are running from one thing to the next. We can end up so exhausted we haven't got the energy or the inclination to be present to one another.

There is a bit of cognitive dissonance on First Advent for me—precisely because when the days get shorter and colder and more hectic I feel like I need more sleep—more rest. And yet the readings for this First Sunday of Advent are like hearing *reveille* played. I feel like pulling the covers back over my head and yet the bugle blares on! Not only this year but every year: the readings appointed for this first Sunday in Advent are meant as a wake-up call.

In Year A, we hear from St. Paul in the letter to the Romans:

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. (Rom 13:11)

And from Matthew's Gospel:

But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. (Mt. 24:43)

In Year B, we get these words from Mark's Gospel:

Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:35-37)

And today, as Year C begins, we heard Luke reminding us to “keep alert!”—even when it feels like the world is coming unglued. Maybe even *especially then*, in the face of distress, confusion, fear, foreboding, and the worries of this life, discipleship is about “keeping alert” and praying for strength and standing tall.

Not only the Biblical texts but the hymns that the tradition has passed along to us also serve as a wake-up call on this day. I think of:

*Wakened by the solemn warning,
from earth's bondage let us rise;
Christ, our sun, all sloth dispelling,
shines upon the morning skies.*

(Hymn 59)

Or this:

*“Sleepers, wake!” A voice astounds us,
the shout of rampart guards surrounds us:
“Awake, Jerusalem, arise!”
Midnight's peace their cry has broken,
their urgent summons clearly spoken:
“The time has come, O maidens wise!
Rise up, and give us light; the bridegroom is in sight...*

(Hymn 61, 62)

While all of these texts reflect on the end times—on the culmination of human history—the response called forth is that in the end as in the beginning and the middle those who claim Jesus as their Lord are called to put our trust in God. The imagery and language the Bible uses is not always consistent or easily pieced together. It is best, I think, not to try to fit Daniel and Revelation and the eschatological literature scattered throughout the New Testament together like pieces to a puzzle; but rather to listen for a choir of voices that are not always singing the same notes.

Together they make a kind of harmony. The melody line, however, is really quite simple. It goes something like this: <http://bands.army.mil/music/bugle/calls/reveille.mp3>

I think that the Buddhists have something to teach us about the meaning of this wake-up call, however. Many of us have been listening to these texts for years, and maybe even decades. If we can hear it in a slightly new way, from a new perspective, then it may suddenly all become new again for us. The Buddhists speak about mindfulness. Maybe that's a good word to substitute for the word “alert.” Because I don't think that Luke means for us to wake up and down two cups of coffee in order to run around and look busy.

In fact, I think he has something completely different in mind. The wake-up call we get on this day is meant to call us back into ourselves—back into the presence of God who is as near to us as our breathing. Luke means to call us back into our bodies: to attentiveness and watchfulness and a sense of centeredness and peacefulness. It would be nice if we could find a way to make December less hectic. It's fun for preachers to complain about the Christmas carols being played in all the stores. But it's a little like tilting at windmills if we think we are going to change all that.

In the midst of it all, however, we can be fully present to what we are doing. When we are in Church we can really be here; not going through a mental checklist of all we need to do this afternoon. When we sit at our tables and light those Advent wreaths we can step off the treadmill

and breathe. We can be more mindful, letting God be God and concentrating on simply being who God calls us to be. Because humans cannot know when the end will come, it is not ours to figure out. What is clear is that in *all* times and in *all* places the Church is called to keep alert and to be on guard and to do the work God has given us to do. What is the work that God has given you to do this day? May each of us wake up to that—and tend to it.

It is said that St. Francis was working in his garden one day and planting a row of peas when someone asked him what he would do if the end of the world came that very day. “I think I would like to finish planting these peas,” he is reported to have responded.

So if the end of your life, or of the world, comes this week: what is it that you want to be doing?

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