

SLEEPERS AWAKE

28 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. 35 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, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

(Mark 13:28-37, NRSV)

Since Matthew's birth I have been dreading the day when he gets his driver's license. Granted, it's over a decade away. Nevertheless, I still shake my head at some of the reckless things I did behind the wheel of a car when I was a teenager. When I was in my twenties, I had my biggest car scare to date. I had completed my first month in seminary, and was driving from Louisville back home to Memphis. I'd been up all night the evening before finishing a paper and couldn't leave Louisville until after work at 5:00 p.m. The drive from Louisville to Memphis was about six and a half hours. I was making good time, but some time after driving through Nashville I found myself getting sleepy. I rolled down the windows and cranked up the radio. After an hour or so, I was still sleepy so I stopped for a cup of coffee. I didn't even drink coffee at the time, so I figured the taste itself would be enough to keep me awake. I was wrong. Not more than 10 minutes later I fell asleep at the wheel. When I woke up, I couldn't see out my windshield. It was as if I was driving through a dust cloud. The next thing I knew, my car was stopped and leaning slightly to one side. I got out, trembling, to look at my car and found that the tires on the right side were embedded in sand, but there was no damage. And then I looked around me. Less than 100 feet behind me was a deep ditch. Less than 100 feet ahead of me was an overpass with large concrete columns. That's when I realized just how close a call I had suffered. That was the last time I ever drove after pulling an all-nighter in school.

I learned my lesson about falling asleep at the wheel, and I haven't done it since. But sometimes I find myself falling asleep at the wheel in life. It's a sleep that creeps up on me in the everyday busyness of one day running into another. Everything becomes kind of blurry, and then all of a sudden I'll realize that I can't see out the windshield. I'm running blindly from one thing to the next. My life has become a series of tasks. Shower, get dressed, walk Matthew to school, go to work, come home, eat dinner, put Matthew to bed, go to sleep. Wake up and start the whole thing over again. When we

fall asleep at the wheel of life, we aren't really living. We're merely going through the motions with family, friends, and God.

But Advent can give us that much needed jolt. Advent reminds us to wake up and spiritually prepare for Christmas. Our televisions tell us what we should buy for Christmas. Our calendars tell us where we should go and who we should see at Christmas. But buying gifts and drinking eggnog, as much fun as these can be, don't prepare us to experience the true hope and joy of the Christ child, born in Bethlehem's stable.

We need Advent to wake us up to the true meaning of the season, for in staying awake we never know just where or when the spirit of Christmas or the Spirit of Christ might find us. Today's scripture lesson from Mark 13 highlights the waiting and watching, which characterized the early Christians. They were fully awake and expected to encounter Christ at any time. At first Jesus, the Messiah, had arrived in their midst in the flesh. While among them, he taught, healed, loved, died, and was resurrected from the dead. These early believers overflowed with faith and power after the Holy Spirit's mighty arrival on Pentecost. They lived waiting and watching for Christ's return, which they fully expected in their lifetimes. In the midst of horrible persecution, these Christians found hope in looking toward a time when Christ would come again as the righteous judge of the world. Their messianic expectation comes through clearly in today's Gospel lesson from Mark chapter 13.

It says, "Then they will see the Son of Man [Jesus] coming in the clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect [the faithful believers] from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." We hear in these words a longing and hope beyond anything the world can offer. The people cry out for deliverance that only God can give.

When will such a thing happen? Can we study the scriptures, make careful calculations and arrive at an exact date, which we'll pencil in on our calendars? Of course not. Mark 13 goes on to say, "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in Heaven, nor the Son of Man, but only the Father." So how are we to live in the meantime? The writer advises us to, "Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come."

The last four verses of chapter 13 are a short parable. Jesus says, "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with their own work, and commands the doorkeeper to be watchful. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, 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" (34-37).

In what ways can Advent wake us up, and help us stay awake throughout the year? Advent encourages us with its simple, beautiful themes. Each week in Advent has a theme, which underscores a crucial element in the Christian life. The first week points

to hope, the hope we have from God in this life and the next. The second week highlights peace, the peace that God desires in the world as well as the peace of mind that our faith can bring. The third week focuses on joy, the kind of joy that cannot be bought and only comes through trust in someone greater than ourselves. The fourth week points to love, the love of God shown to us in the birth of Jesus and the love for others revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus.

This brings us to Christmas Eve, the night we sing “Away in a Manger” and “Silent Night.” The night we watch our children become Christmas Pageant angels and sheep. The night we read Luke’s account of the humble birth of our heavenly King. All these events warm our hearts and nourish our souls. And they whisper, “Wake up!” Wake up to the joy of this holy season. Wake up to the joy in your life.

When we wake up in our own lives, we also wake up to the needs of others. I’ve found that one of the best ways to stay awake to the true meaning of Christmas is to reach out to those in need. Our Angel Tree, which will be up next Sunday, offers the perfect opportunity to do just that. Taking the time to buy warm socks for a homeless man, a doll for a child whose mother is fleeing domestic violence, or nails to build a wheelchair ramp for a disabled person reminds us that Christmas is about giving. When we take our children to sing Christmas carols to our church’s homebound members or bring cookies to a lonely neighbor we tap in to the spirit of giving. When we give money to help the hungry on Long Island and the famine victim in Ethiopia we tap in to the spirit of giving. When we take the time to listen to a friend who is sad and grieving in this holiday season we tap in to the spirit of giving. When we’re spiritually awake, we’ll see countless opportunities to help others experience God’s love first hand.

Finally, Advent offers us the chance to awaken spiritually through moments of personal reflection. The Christmas season can easily send our senses into overload, but it can also stir up in us deep-seated memories and hopes. And so this year, when we see twinkling Christmas lights, may they remind us of the twinkling stars that graced the night sky over Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago. When we hear Christmas music, may we absorb the joy it confers. When we smell the fresh Christmas trees stacked in our courtyard, may it remind us of the beauty of God’s creation. When we taste Christmas cookies may they remind us of our own childhood and deepen our resolve to improve the lives of our world’s children. And when our hands hold that first Christmas gift, may we be touched by the love expressed through the very act of giving. For love and giving are what Christmas is all about—God’s love expressed in the gift of Jesus. What a blessing it would be if we could awaken to the reality of this gift, not only during Advent, but all the year through. AMEN.

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Advent I

December 1, 2002

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Most merciful God, we thank you that waking or sleeping we are ever enfolded in your loving arms. Open our eyes to behold your presence in all parts of our lives. Keep us from putting you on the fringe of our lives, turning to you only in times of need. Keep us aware that you forever accompany us in all of life's journey. Help us break life's comfortable routine that we might dare to see and hear you in unexpected times and places. Awaken us to human need in our community and around the world. Awaken our compassion that we might be diligent in doing good deeds and creating a more just society.

And now, O God, accompany us in these days of Advent that we might grow closer to you and to one another. Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.

(Portions of this prayer were adapted from *When We Gather*, by James G. Kirk, Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001, p. 140.)