

“KEEP AWAKE”
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37
November 27, 2011
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Any of us who watched television at all in the week leading up to Thanksgiving were deluged with advertisements about the coming of Black Friday. I remember that it used to be that stores would open “early” on the day after Thanksgiving, as early as 8:00a.m., to celebrate the official beginning of the Christmas shopping orgy. Then it was 7:00a.m., then 6:00, then 5:00, then 3:00, then the bold move to midnight. Yes we leave Thanksgiving itself pristine, but the very second it is over, let the shopping games begin! This year, in an unprecedented move, Wal-mart pushed back or forward—I’m not sure which word is most suitable—anyway, it decided to open at 10:00 p.m. Thanksgiving night (an altruistic move, we are told, for the comfort of consumers, so “you won’t have to wait outside”). How compassionate! Even with all this compassion, one frantic consumer pepper-sprayed those in line in front of her for X boxes, and a man was shot and killed in a Wal-mart parking lot for refusing to give up his purchases. But somehow I don’t think middle of the night shopping was what Jesus had in mind in this morning’s gospel reading when he counseled his listeners: “Stay awake!”

Then again, maybe such things are exactly what we should be staying awake for, paying attention to. I don’t know about you, but as soon as I begin to hear the haunting loveliness of “O come, o come Emmanuel,” my desire is to flee to, to hide inside the measured cadences of the Advent church, to prepare myself to snuggle down in a romanticized warm and cozy stable, fill my senses with the earthy smells of warm animal flesh, the rustle of small creatures in the straw, the magic of lantern light, and a baby’s first cry in long ago Bethlehem.

I don’t want to remember the fact that Mary and Joseph only traveled to Bethlehem so that the efficient machine of empire could improve its capacity for taxation—40% for those living in the provinces; 50-60% for those unfortunate enough to live around large cities, like Jerusalem where whole garrisons of Roman soldiers were billeted and bureaucrats had to be paid, housed, and fed. I don’t want to think that the stable—probably a cave dug into the Bethlehem hillside—was dank and moldy, the straw dirty, the young couple inside scared, lonely, desperate. I don’t want to speculate that if Mary and Joseph had had more money, they probably could have found room in an inn. I don’t want to image the Holy couple victimized by the world, but instead encased in a cocoon of warmth and light and the peace that passes human understanding.

But all of that is a dream. It wasn’t Joseph and Mary’s world. It isn’t our world. And it is certainly not the world of Jesus’ teaching. Quit your romantic dreams! Stay awake! Pay attention! Do not separate from the world in this season, but instead watch it closely. Open your eyes to that which you would rather not see. Open your ears to what you would not hear. Open your heart to all that is going on out there, all of it. The purpose of Advent in the church is not to shut our doors on the world, but to bring even, especially, all of that noise and pain, all of our corporate greed and concupiscence inside with us, and place it front and center next to the Advent wreath where we just lit a candle for hope. Ironic? Yes. No. I don’t know. What I do know that is that if there is any real hope to be had, it is hope out there in the staying awake

world. I know that if there is real peace to be found, or love, or joy, those are just words, purely illusion unless seen through eyes wide open.

Advent time. We are called to be introspective in this season, to search ourselves for the stirring or the warmth, or the fury—or all three—that is our faith. We are called to pay attention and to keep paying attention until we find our soul's deepest yearning, but that yearning for God exists in and through and for the awake world. In the person of Jesus, in the Word made flesh, God insists that the spiritual exists inseparable from the material world. And so therefore, we, to prepare to find the Divine inside, we must open ourselves to the world outside.

So yesterday, I tried to spend my entire day keeping awake. Here are some of the things I found. I took a bath in the morning, and I paid attention not just to the luxury of bath water, but that, at least in most parts of this country, we can drink the water we bathe in. Despite that, did you know that Americans alone spend 15 billion dollars a year on single use bottled water. That's 50 billion bottles going into the landfill every year: 167 bottles per year for every man, woman, and child in America. This water is generally no better/safer than tap water, and it costs more per gallon than gasoline.

After doing my morning chores, including putting fresh orange peels on the side porch to keep the skunks away, I went to visit a friend to discuss something so frivolous that I am embarrassed to share it with you all. But that's the good news about friendship! It can endure, in fact enjoys, ridiculousness. I remembered to thank God for the friends I can laugh with and the friends I can cry with, and the ones with whom I can share all manner of silly things. It is those closest to us who too often we take for granted. It's good to pay attention.

I went grocery shopping. On my way out of the Safeway, just outside the entrance to the parking lot, a man sat with his dog and a sign. "No money. No home. No food. Do you have work I can do? Will do anything." Late mornings on game days are a busy time for Safeway. There were four cars in front of me going out to the stop sign on to the road. The drivers of the first three vehicles looked away from the man and his sign, trying to make him invisible. The fourth, a middle aged man, got out of his car, handed the homeless man a \$20 bill and what looked to be a business card. Then he shook the man's hand. That was the best part for me. The driver behind me honked. I tried to think about being desperate enough to set up with my sign at the entrance to Safeway. What is it like to have most people see you and look away, try to pretend you're not there. What makes us treat others as invisible and what is the cost? As you know, I sit of the Board of Community Outreach. The number of homeless families is up 36% over last year in Oregon. All of the social service agencies that deal with the poor have had their budgets cut.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to go to Bermuda of all places for a vacation. Bermudians are like the Irish. They love talking to strangers, and they love talking about their country. I asked a taxi driver if homelessness was a problem on the island. He shook his head as he looked at me, puzzled. "Isn't that what government is for?" he asked me. In Bermuda, all citizens have health insurance, and all have housing, and the chronically mentally ill—this man had a sister who was a schizophrenic—live in government-supported group homes. I wonder if we will ever live in a country where we believe that government is for taking care of the poor and vulnerable so we don't have to pretend they're invisible.

When I came home from the store, I cleaned out the refrigerator to make room for the new food. My housemates and I have tried to cut down on wasted food, but still there was some I had to throw out. Every year, Americans throw out 34 million tons of food. A recent study from the University of Arizona claims that if one adds up food left in fields, rotted at distribution sites, left uneaten on restaurant plates, as well as that thrown out of refrigerators, about one half the food produced in this country is never eaten. This creates environmental problems as well as moral ones. More to think about.

With food taken care of and a cup of tea at my elbow, I sat down for some sermon writing. My six month old kitten-Mio cuddled up next to me wanting a tummy rub. It's hard to quantify the comfort effect of a purring kitten beside you, but it is substantial, another gift to pay attention to.

So that was much of my Saturday. Trying to stay awake. Paying attention. Keeping Advent. So how did all this connect me to the Divine? It's not something I can come at directly with words. I know that by paying attention, I was moved to learn more about single-use water bottles and wasted food. I know that I remembered to be grateful for gifts ordinary and extraordinary: food and water, friends human and feline. And I do know more about what I long for. I long for a country not divided between the one percent and the 99%, where there is no need to Occupy, where the poor and vulnerable really are invisible, or, better said, where they are indistinguishable because they have homes, and food, and are treated with dignity and respect, and no one looks away when they come near, and it happened because we know that "that's what government is for." I long for more people like the man who got out of his car to shake a homeless man's hand. I long for a heart that remembers to count my blessings every day. I long for the Word made flesh over and over and over again, until when the angels sing of Peace on earth and good will to all, there is no sadness in me, only joy, because they sing of truth and not just hope.

What do you long for? What will you find keeping Advent? Stay awake. Pay attention. Because you never know when your heart will be moved, or your mind will be changed, or you will see the Word in flesh. Thanks be to God. Amen.