

“Keep Awake! Be Alert”

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Isaiah 64: 1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13: 33-37

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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.”

Fourteen years ago, I had the chance to take some yoga classes. I loved it. Besides finding out that I could actually become flexible – something I’d never believed possible – I discovered that during this hour I was totally focused on what was happening in that room – the instructor, the music, the mat, my breathing. I’d experienced something similar during Tai Kwon Do classes – forgetting for a time the challenges that were part of that days.

Then we moved again I could no longer share in either of those practices. I tried to keep up an at-home yoga practice but it was hit or miss – until my concussion almost five

years ago. During the months following my fall on that Epiphany Sunday, I found that the only things to give me any real relief from the constant headache were yoga and meditation. Both became a regular part of my days that I've worked to keep up.

Why do I bring this up? Jesus tells us to keep awake, keep alert repeatedly in today's lesson, even more if you read the preceding verses. How often are we not really awake and present in our own lives?

Of course, the gospel-writer was writing about something beyond "living in the moment." Just a couple verses earlier, Jesus says, "This generation won't pass away until all these things happen." Then we hear, "But nobody knows when that day or hour will come," only God. In other words, Christ will come again, but without warning, so pay attention. Be alert. Keep awake.

Jesus offers a brief parable. The master goes away, leaving his slaves in charge. What is it that he wants? He wants to find that they have kept the house well. To do that, the householders have to remain alert, watchful at all times. By not telling them when he'll return, maybe they'll work more at keeping ready.

How do they do this? How do we do it? By paying attention to every little thing. By living in the present, something that, it turns out, is very difficult. By being attuned to the here and now. By teaching ourselves to say – as my friend Bob's guru taught him – "I'm in this moment now... Now I'm in this moment."

For me, this is where meditation comes in. The world as I know it could end this afternoon, like in Tim LaHaye's novel, but if I'm not paying attention I might not even notice. I could just keep doing business as usual. When I take time for my meditation practice, I'm primed to notice when more geese are flying overhead or when someone's having a bad day or when I see Christ in the words or actions of someone around me.

This last is an important bit because while some of you are waiting in anticipation of Christ's second coming, some of you aren't. Either way, all of us need to keep alert and look for Christ. If you're not paying attention, you might miss Christ's words when your phone call ends with an "I love you." You might miss Christ when that bell ringer says, "Merry Christmas" when you put a bill in the red kettle and even when you put nothing in it. You might miss Christ when the Habitat for Humanity people or the folks who serve at our Personal Needs Closet ask you to help with the good work they're doing. Christ is around us and with us every day. We need to keep awake so that we don't miss him. So that we can join him.

What do you do to make sure you're ready to notice Christ – in the everyday or in that "great gettin' up mornin'"? If that question's not to your liking, here's another: Where will we look for God this Advent season?

This chapter in Mark's gospel begins with the disciples "ooing" and "aahing" over by the grandeur of the temple, exclaiming, "Teacher, look! What awesome stones and buildings!" Jesus responds by talking about the temple's imminent destruction.

Things are changing. The temple isn't going to be God's residence for much longer. Is Jesus trying to prepare them so that in a few years, when the temple's destroyed, they're ready to answer that same question, "Where do we find God?"

When they can no longer look to the temple, they can find God at the cross. No longer contained by walls or assumptions, God will be on the hill and in the garden. No longer found within the center of power and authority, disciples will know to look in the wilderness – in the slums, and in the eyes of the outcasts – and they'll find God there.

Where you find God will depend on what you're looking for. Jesus counsels us to be watchful, not to be deceived by those other false ones who will also do great works but don't come from God.

But we can so easily be lead astray. We willingly – even hopefully – follow false saviors and false prophets, people who appear to be good but lead us in wrong directions. These can be world leaders but they can also be personal heroes.

Disciples – then and now – need a reality check. So we're told again as we begin Advent, the start of a new year on the Christian calendar, to "keep awake" and "be alert." Hopefully we can realize that these cautions are about more than being ready for God's undisclosed end-times. Jesus is telling us to be watchful, to be discerning, especially in the midst of all the turmoil around us. Jesus is warning us to know what we're looking for.

Now that God has become human like us, it's so easy to remake God – at least in our minds. We can all too easily assume that God thinks or acts like us. We need to keep re-awaking ourselves to the reality that God is quite "other," different than anything we can understand. Only then can we really get God.

So where will you look for God this Advent season? In what way will you prepare yourself so that you don't miss it when God shows up?

I don't have the answer to what will work for you, but you probably know already. I encourage you, this Advent, to practice whatever that is, practice it each day during these next three weeks so that when God shows up, as we can be confident God will, you'll notice. You'll be ready.

Being ready for what comes isn't easy. There's a story about a woman who went into an ice cream shop in Beverly Hills. She was standing in line when she noticed Paul Newman walk in and get in line behind her. Feeling rattled, she paid for her cone, then walked out

the door. But once outside she realized she didn't have her ice cream. Not wanting to look foolish, she waited a few minutes before returning to the shop but looking around she still couldn't find her cone. She stood there, wondering where it could be when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned and there was Paul Newman suggesting that if she was looking for her ice cream, she might look in her purse.ⁱ

We may not be able to be ready for when a celebrity shows up, but we are given tools so that we can be ready for God. Jesus teaches us to spend time in prayer and devotion, to gather in worship, to reach out and be present with those in need or want. These practices ready our hearts and minds – our beings – for noticing God.

Two thousand years ago, God's new way of being in the world was to show up as a baby in a backwater village in Palestine. Living as one of us, he grew and learned, made friends and taught and eventually faced torture and violent death so that we might be drawn into new life.

Let God draw you again into that new life. God means for us to live abundantly, as part of God's intention for this world, something so much bigger than ourselves. This is what we're made for. To celebrate each stranger's victory of injustice, to be there when someone whispers, "I don't know what to do," to work together for peace, to invite others to join us in joyful, hopeful living through everything we do and say.

May this be our Advent practice.

Amen.

ⁱ Raymond McHenry, *Something to Think About*, Illustration 1094.