

Advent 1B (RCL)  
Isaiah 64:1-9  
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:24-37

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St. Paul's - Greenville

Please pray with me: Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" Amen. [Advent prayer by Henri Nouwen, <http://anglicanprayer.wordpress.com/2008/11/30/advent-favorites-henri-nouwen-an-advent-prayer/>]

I read a book last weekend that began with a provocative question: If you have woken up, can you wake up more? I've spent the week wrestling with that.

Think about the everyday act of waking up. Sometimes one wakes up refreshed and ready to hit the ground running. Sometimes it's slower. If I have to wake up particularly early—to catch an early flight, for instance—I wake up enough to move from the bed to the shower to the door, but it may be several hours (or time zones) later before I'm really awake. And as we age, it can just be harder to get our bodies to move the way we want them to our brains may be awake, but our bodies struggle to catch up. And I doubt I'm the only one who finds it harder to wake up in the mornings when it's still dark outside. The light of the day can help us arise; these days the sun doesn't break the horizon until a few minutes before 7 a.m., so it's still relatively dark until nearly 6:30.

And as we enter this new year in the church—a few weeks before the rest of our culture marks the new year—the church calls us to wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Our opening hymn began, "Sleepers wake! A voice astounds us!" (Hymnal 1982, #61) Our readings call us to wake up: the prophet Isaiah implores God to do something dramatic—and wake the people up from their sinful ways. The psalmist, working with the image of darkness and light—and it's no coincidence that we began our Advent worship by lighting a candle on the Advent wreath—repeats three times "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." Show us the light, God; bring us out of the darkness; awaken us, and we shall be saved. And in our Gospel, Jesus warns his followers, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." And the reading concludes, "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

So what is this waking up all about? It may be a new liturgical year, but we've been here before—other first Sundays in Advent, even another first Sunday of Advent with the same readings. three years ago. If it feels familiar, there are even more good reasons for that: more often than not, it's the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend that begins the season of Advent. We're at the end of November; there are only a few weeks until Christmas, and our to-do lists, this year as in years past, are likely lengthy and growing. We know what this season is about. It's preparation for Christmas: connecting with friends and family near and far by writing notes on Christmas cards, decorating our homes, figuring out that one gift that will surprise and delight, cookies to bake, office parties, long lines at the post office or UPS to mail greetings and presents. If we have an Advent calendar, we're not opening the little windows yet, but we are—at least in our heads—counting the days.

This, my sisters and brothers, is why the church says so emphatically, "WAKE UP!"

Advent is the season before Christmas, a time when we are preparing for our celebrations of Christmas. But it's way too easy for us to get overwhelmed, lost in the preparations, and to miss the opportunity to which Advent invites us, a paradoxical opportunity to do less, to wait expectantly. Advent invites us to slow down, to linger in the darkness of shorter days and longer nights, and to consider what it's all about. In a wonderful book entitled

*The Liturgical Year*, Joan Chittester notes aptly, “The church year does not start here because Christmas is coming. The church year starts here to remind us why Jesus was born in the first place. Most of all, it starts here to call us to determine why we ourselves are here at all.” [p. 64]

Why are we here? This may be an question easy to avoid, perhaps because your life seems too busy to allow such reflection, or maybe because the question is simply too unsettling, too scary even, to consider. But it’s an important one, and the starting place from which to consider our individual answers to the “why am I here” question depends, I suggest, on the reason Jesus was born in the first place and what that event has to do with our being here.

It is tempting to tip my hand here, to give you at least a hint about why Jesus was born in the first place and how that helps to answer the question about why we’re here, but that would tip this sermon into a Christmas sermon, and I don’t want to go there. Yet. Instead, I want to focus on the grace that Advent can bring to us and our lives, if we are willing to let it, if we are willing to wake up and then wait.

Here’s the challenge: in the familiarity of this Advent season, even if we do make time and space for some intentional waiting (not the inevitable waiting for the cashier, the parking space, or any of the irritating waitings we expect in these weeks before Christmas), it’s all too easy to slip into platitudes about waiting for Jesus’ coming. Which takes me back to that first question from the book I read last weekend: if you’ve woken up, can you wake up more? That’s a bigger challenge. Can we, in our waiting, move beyond what we in the past have thought about this? Can we, in our waiting, allow the Spirit to take us deeper into the mystery of the incarnation, both God coming among us in the form of a helpless infant and God coming among us at all? Can we, in our waiting, wake up and look at ourselves more honestly and grapple with some essential questions? Chittester offered two that I think would be fine fodder for Advent reflection: “[W]hat is it for which you are spending your life?” And “What is the star you are following now?” [p. 62]

Our *Book of Common Prayer* includes an invitation extended on Ash Wednesday for the observation of a holy Lent. There is, unfortunately, nothing similar for the first Sunday of Advent. So I’ll have to improvise: I invite you, in the name of the Church and for the sake of the Gospel, to the observance of a holy Advent. In these crazy-busy days, make time to slow down and consider the really important questions: why did Jesus come into our world? And what difference does your being here make? You might incorporate a lit candle in your meditation—using it as a focal point can make sitting in the quiet easier. Or make an Advent wreath and meditate on its increasing luminescence as the weeks of Advent progress. Invite God to wake you up more, to help you see God in a new way, to consider your relationship with God differently, to glimpse some insight into why God needs you here. Now.

A Methodist pastor and poet wrote these words, which are my prayer for Advent:

Move over the face of my deep, my darkness, my endless restless chaos, and create, O God; trouble me, comfort me, stir me up, and calm me, but do not cease to breathe your Spirit into my wakening soul.

[Jan Richardson, *Night Visions*]

Amen.

