

“Keep Awake!”

First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011, Year B

Isaiah 64:1-4; Mark 13:24-37

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

Rev. Martha Leahy

One idea I had for my sermon today was to arm our children with lots of noise-making instruments – horns, bells, whistles – and every time I said the words, “Keep awake!” they would blast out a choral response. But after thinking it over, I took pity upon those in the congregation, some of whom might just have woken up and made it here at 10:05, 10:10, 10:20.... or even later. Those persons might not be fully awake yet and it would be jarring, to say the least, to be jolted out of our seats when the happy band played. Other persons of whom I am mindful are those of us who cannot see well, those who cannot hear well, and those whose emotional threads are wound so tightly right now that a simple, “Good morning,” called out by someone close behind your ear, might cause you to drop right down in dead faint on the floor. No one likes sudden, loud noises.....no one, that is, except God.

The epic movie director, Cecil B. DeMille, whose films include toga epics like *The Ten Commandments*, *King of Kings*, *Cleopatra*, and *Samson and Delilah*, once gave some advice about how to make a blockbuster: “Start with an earthquake, then build to a climax.” That pretty much sums up the start of Advent for us, as we read a curious passage from the Gospel of Mark about the end times.

Why are we reading this “little apocalypse” in Mark, about the resurrected Jesus returning to collect his faithful people to him? Isn’t that so out of place when we should be talking instead about the coming birth of the baby Jesus, in a manger, to poor, wayfaring strangers, in a cattle stall?

We can recall all the many times when God has spoken dramatically to the world in the past: to the cosmos at the time of creation, when God took a formless void of nothingness and spoke, “Let there be light,” and there was light and all the brilliant forms of that light– sunlight, moonlight, lightening, fire, volcanoes; when God spoke to a man named Noah who built an ark for God when the created world had not become the paradise God planned, so God said, “Let there be rain,” and the world disappeared in a gray haze and there was no more light; when God said to a leader named Moses, “Let my people be free,” and Moses led God’s chosen people out of slavery in Egypt by a miraculous series of plagues and an astounding parting of the Red Sea. All of this high drama caused by the power of God’s Word: all film-worthy scenarios better than any screen writer could dream up.

But now the stakes are even higher. Humankind does not seem to understand the lessons that God wishes us to learn. How many more ways can God speak to us and make us understand? How can God keep us awake?

There is a passage in 1Kings 19:12 that describes how God appeared to the prophet Elijah, who had traveled to the holy mountain of Horeb to throw himself on God's mercy, as the Israelites were turning back to their old gods and even threatening to kill God's messenger, Elijah. It reads:

“And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ (Elijah) replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹¹ The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a (still, small voice). ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

God's first response to Elijah was to show all the mighty power at the Divine disposal: the great and powerful wind, the shuddering earthquake, the flames of fire. These are manifestations of God's power that don't require much convincing – we see and hear and we are knocked off our feet. Yet the response that finally got Elijah's attention was silence, then what is described as a “still, small voice.” Then when God saw Elijah was ready, a true conversation began between God and God's creation.

Jesus is talking about the same thing in the Gospel of Mark, when he describes the great cosmic events that will accompany his return:

“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

When Jesus returns, he says the sun and the moon will be blotted out, stars will fall from the sky, and there will be earthquakes in the air. Then his talk turns to a tender sign that he asks us to look for: the budding of fig tree and the greening of its leaves:

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.³⁰”

No thunder, no lightning bolts, no stars falling out of the sky. Jesus will come like a tender, natural event, like the gentle signs of a coming summer - a quiet, ordinary event, gone unnoticed by most, except those who have been told to watch for the signs.

In the same way, the season of Advent proclaims God’s earth-shaking work is being done in the most quiet, ordinary and unnoticed ways. In Advent we begin our yearly waiting for the return of Jesus, not as a full-grown divinity with a 2,000-plus-year history, but as a newborn baby, the most fragile and helpless creature on Earth. In Advent, we think about how the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth: a poor traveler born in a borrowed manger. In Advent we come to realize how the birth of one child shook the world. After Jesus was born, everything changed; nothing stayed the same. We learned through him that God loved us and wanted a relationship with us. We learned that God demands something in return: that we love God and love one another. We learned, however, that the road Jesus traveled was a hard one, and many of us were not willing to take that hazardous step towards God. After all, to deal with God is to step into the unknown – into eye-popping and ear-deafening cataclysms, or into sacred and mysterious stillness. How can we not keep awake for all this excitement?

In our modern-day Advent, it’s harder to stay asleep than it is to stay awake. We are focused on Christmas and we need to make it to the finish line. We have our holiday lists running through our heads: cards to send, presents to buy, meals to prepare, holiday concerts and office parties to attend, child care to plan for school vacation, decorating the house, picking out the tree...and the list goes on. It is not the waiting we are worried about, it’s the doing. We don’t need anyone telling us to stay awake this month – we rather need someone to tell us to slow down and savor this month-long journey towards God and the holy birth of Jesus before it passes us by.

How might we balance these seemingly opposite things – slowing down and keeping awake? What they have in common is this: to simply notice. Notice when you are holding your breath in anxiety. Notice when your hands are gripping the wheel too tightly. Notice when your answers to questions are short and sharp. Notice when Christmas carols start to become annoying. Notice when you are too busy to visit with friends, or drop by a neighbor's to say hello. Notice when you can't sleep at night for worrying about how this Christmas is not going to be like last year's, because of fewer gifts under the tree, or the glaring absence of a loved one lost.

Then, keep awake. Keep awake for the signs of God's presence. Notice when a whispered prayer brings us comfort. Notice when a simple smile is returned with a blaze of warmth. Notice when an old tradition or habit loses its meaning and, when we cast it off, it brings us a sense of relief and freedom. Notice when the memory of a loved one brings tears, but also thanksgiving for having had them in our lives. Notice that, in our insomnia, we have a chance to talk to God longer than we normally would. Notice how being awake to how God is working in our lives is the gift that keeps on giving.

This Advent, let's keep awake for God's signs and wonders. Let's tell the familiar story, sing the familiar songs, and bring the familiar candlelight into our sanctuary and into our lives. Let's notice when God starts out with an earthquake and builds to a climax. Let's notice our God - who comes to us in wind, in fire, in a still, small voice, and in a little baby - who beckons us to come closer, who urges us to remember the ancient stories from the past and live into them in the present.

We might not see the sun go out or stars fall this Christmas, but we can picture in our minds one heavenly star, stopping over a humble manger, and waiting.... waiting for the One who is to come, the One who came and the One who will come again. Keep awake! Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume I (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 20-25.

Zondervan NIV Study Bible, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).