

November 27, 2005/First Sunday of Advent/David L. Edwards

Advent: A Time to Wake Up

Isaiah 64:1-9 *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--....*

Mark 13:24-37 *“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”*

To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. --Henry David Thoreau, Walden

Advent is the four-week season that helps us prepare for a meaningful celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Advent developed in the early centuries of the church's life as a time of repentance and self-examination. The Christian community recognized that we cannot jump right into Christmas without preparation, reflection, and contemplation of what it really means. Advent is a time for being more attentive to inward journey--silence, inner listening, reflection--in order to hear more clearly in our own time and in our own lives the message of God's presence with us in Jesus. Advent is a counter-cultural season. It resists the superficiality and commercialism that surrounds us these days. It is a season for quieting down and slowing down, for deep listening and deep looking, for learning what it means to wait on God. Advent is a time for turning toward the realities of our lives, not away from them, in order to perceive God's loving and saving presence.

This first Sunday of Advent is an opportunity to get our bearings at the start of this important spiritual season. In an essay on Advent, Thomas Merton refers to an Advent sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux [SEASONS OF CELEBRATION]. The word advent means coming or arrival, or we might even say presence. Bernard talks about three Advents. The first Advent is Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, the first coming or presence of Jesus as the Christ, the special messenger from God. The third Advent refers to what is spoken of in various biblical images as the coming of the kingdom, the return and reign of Christ, or the Day of the Lord. This is the hope for a world completely transformed in God's love and will. The second Advent is the presence of the living Christ with us, his community, in the present moment. The first Advent is the past. The third Advent is the future. The second Advent is where we are now, and where our focus needs to be as we enter this Advent/Christmas season.

Bernard laid it out in a helpful way. On one level, the Advent/Christmas season is about the past. We hear the stories of Jesus'

birth and the words of the prophets of Israel. But we are not IN the past. Advent/Christmas is not a sentimental journey back to Bethlehem. Much of what is celebrated these days, in our culture and the church, is a nostalgic, imaginary trip into the past and an abandoning of the realities and challenges of the present. We are to listen to the biblical stories, the teachings of Jesus, and the words of the prophets during this season with our feet firmly planted in the present. This is where and when we are to come alive as people of God.

We cannot live in the future either. Bernard's third Advent speaks of hope because God's ultimate purposes are being and will be worked out. This kind of hope is not what normally passes for hope. It is not hope as wish dreaming, looking for an escape from the present, with its challenges, its struggles, even its pain. The words of Isaiah that we heard this morning are not plea for God to pluck the prophet out of the present suffering and into some future, care-free time. It is a prayer that God might enter into that suffering, be revealed in the present, to bring relief and healing. It is an agonized cry that comes from full awareness of human need and frailty and failings. Biblical faith does not look to God to fix all our problems or make our difficulties go away. Rather, faith is an embracing of our lives, with all their difficulties, while striving to remain open to God's presence and power of new life, a presence and power we may not experience at the time.

Life can become so overwhelming at times that we just want to escape, to somehow fly away into a future without cares. The way our culture celebrates Christmas is so difficult for many people precisely because it denies the difficult realities we face personally and as a human family. We enter this Advent/Christmas season aware of the difficult realities of life. The senselessness and immorality of war grinding on and on in Iraq. A society increasingly divided between rich and poor, and a political system that rewards the rich and punishes the poor. So many people continuing to suffer loss and homelessness because of a devastating hurricane season, while Congress votes itself another raise. And there are the personal realities that are part of each of our lives. We shared Thanksgiving with Kaye's mother who, three days before, had been told that she has a tumor in her brain that will in a matter of months take her life. She feels that she had had a long and full life, but a reality has come into her life that makes this season particularly difficult. Mental health people tell us that this is the hardest season of the year for people enduring mental and emotional suffering. No wonder. The kind of gaiety and festivity promoted during these weeks does not speak of the hope that is really hope. We need a hope that takes seriously the realities of our lives. Otherwise, it is only a mask put on despair. Hope, if it is the wrong kind, can be an illusion.

The kind of hope spoken of in scripture arises in our hearts when we perceive that God's purposes are always working in the depths of life, beyond our seeing, and those purposes will be fulfilled. Maybe not tomorrow. Maybe not in our lifetime. Maybe not in our children's lifetimes. What Bernard called the "third Advent" says to us that the suffering, injustice, and lovelessness that we still experience as persons, as nations, and as a world will not have the final say, is not the last word. When Christians in the generations after Jesus' death and resurrection spoke of Christ's coming in power and glory, this is what they meant. What was seen and known and heard in Jesus, the kind of life he lived and shared with us, is the way it is all meant to be and will be. It is the truth and the way. We can count on it.

Hope that is not an illusion is experienced as we live fully in the present, with all its challenges and sometimes its pains. Jesus tells his disciples, and all of us, to keep awake, to live with awareness and alertness. We can know nothing about when or how God will ultimately heal the world, finally bring about that realm of justice and peace called the Kingdom of God. "About that day or hour no one knows, not the angels and not even the Son, but only God," says Jesus. The life of faith is characterized by awareness, alertness, watchfulness. This image is used throughout the New Testament to describe the life of faith. It is a life fully awake in the present, not slumbering in nostalgia or in false hoping. Faith has the dimension of waiting for God's redemptive movement in our lives. But this kind of waiting is not DOING NOTHING. It is not passivity, but an active waiting and an active life. The hope comes from living fully in the present with love and compassion, in confidence that a Power greater than us is at work in the depths of life to bring about new life. The light of God's promise of new life for us and the world can burn in our hearts as a patient confidence.

The spirituality of Advent has to do with our being as present as we can be, aware of our own lives, the struggles we have, the pain that we may be experiencing, whether our own or that of others and our world. Our daily inward journey is a time for taking stock of our lives and our spirits. Where are we feeling discouragement, despair, or depression? Where in our lives or in the world around us do we cry for God to tear open the heavens and come down? Spiritual courage enables us to embrace these things in our own spirits, not run away from or ignore them. If we are doing that, then we find a sense of peace as we look deeply into the challenges, struggles, and pains of our lives. This is acceptance, and with acceptance can come the opening of insight and understanding, and, ultimately, hope and healing. We do all of this in the comforting spirit of Isaiah's words—God is our potter and we are the clay. God is our maker and the shaper of our lives. We ARE God's people. God is with us in ways we cannot presently see.

The outward journey arises from this inward journey of reality and hope. Being people who, in Jesus' words, are staying awake, who are endeavoring to be alert, means that we continue to live in ways consistent with the future God promises. We live the future now, in our own lives. Jesus' call to keep awake has this moral dimension. It means that we keep striving to live according to Jesus' words, his teachings, which, as Jesus says to the disciples, will never pass away. Compassion. Forgiveness. Peace making. Living in right relationship with other people and the earth as God's creation. The spiritually awake life is an engaged life in which we practice the kingdom of God now, even when the world around us looks like anything but God's kingdom.

I think that all of this tells us that during this season we need to be gentle and patient with our struggles, all the stuff in our lives that causes us pain. We embrace our own lives, as wounded or confused as they may be, with the same care that God has for us. We do not hide our discouragements, our anxiousness or sadness, even our sense of despair about ourselves or the world around us. But neither do we give in to them, for we are more than all of those things. And life is more than those things. We keep our spirits open, open to hope, open to God's presence and power, which are beyond our complete knowing. We learn to wait with patience and with hope, as we practice faithfulness in those things that Jesus taught and embodied, the kind of life that he revealed, the life of compassion, of forgiveness, of love. In spite of everything we may see around us or feel within us, we continue to hold onto Jesus' words that will never pass away and practice them as best we can in our daily lives. Remembering God's faithfulness in the past, keeping a window in our spirits open to God's future, we live fully awake in the present as those who know God's presence with us in the living Christ.