



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Staying Awake Even When the Sky Isn't Falling

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 30, 2014
The First Sunday of Advent—Based on Mark 13:24-37*

Advent is for me the most elegant of the seasons. Somehow it miraculously survives in a rarefied part of our lives as liturgical Christians in the midst of one of the most over-the-top, outlandish times of the year. Oddly, loving one does not mean not loving the other. In all the noise and sparkle of "the season," the season of which I speak is the one in which we are to be jolly—as in holly, jolly, we manage to preserve—because we want to, not because we are better than others: this marvelous little jewel of the four Sundays before Christmas, known as Advent. Anglicized from the Latin *adventus*, which means coming, Advent joins the notions of waiting for the coming of the Christ child and the coming of Christ again.

It is not as simple as it sounds. At this time each year, I always recall the little boy in a former parish, who upon hearing me preach passionately during Advent about preparing ourselves for the coming of the Christ child, poked his mother and whispered loudly, "Didn't he come last year?" And that doesn't even get to the complication of what we really mean by the coming of Christ again. For many of us, certainly for me, the Second Coming is a magnificent metaphor not for one final act of God but for the coming of Christ into the world again and again into the hearts and minds of those who search. Putting that into a catchy holiday jingle defies even the best of Madison Avenue or Silicone Valley.

But it is far from a downer. The themes of Advent tell us how to live; each week we shall hear in these dramatic passages clues about how to live as people of God in a mixed up world, a world in which keeping our heads and hearts about us is not easy. These weeks ground us and give us courage; they inspire us and make us disturbed with the way things are; and they give us hope—hope for that which we sometimes only glimpse but see enough to recognize as that to which God is calling us. We know we don't have it—not in full—but we know we want it.

The first and one of the most dramatic themes of Advent is to wake up. We hear it loudly in today's gospel. Though it seems so ordinary—something we do everyday at least once and for those of us who nap more than that—waking up and being awake is not always easy; in fact, true wakefulness is one of the most challenging demands of the spiritual life. A sad truth about the practice of religion is that it sometimes anesthetizes us, numbs us. When it does that, when it urges us to proceed on automatic pilot through the utterly familiar, when it settles us down or makes us unendingly comfortable, it is not the practice to which we are called. There is nothing found in the life and words of Jesus to suggest that he came to teach us to escape anything. "Wake up, be present, pay attention," Jesus said again and again.

To be honest, just this week when the news from Ferguson, MO, was announced, there was a strong pull toward looking the other way. Part of us wanted to say, it is not here; it's there. Yes, the circumstances surrounding this grand jury were strange, even extraordinary; but surely the presumption of justice delivered at the hands of the law in this country is crucial to our common wellbeing and must be upheld. Disorder is scary and unsettling, we whispered in some part of our consciousness; order must be preserved. Police misconduct is the exception, not the rule. Second-guessing their self-defense is a slippery slope. And on I could go, each point containing some truth and, yet, each one keeping me from feeling the discomfort that I, as an awake human being, need to feel. Wakefulness, the message of Advent, is not optional; it is the obligation and responsibility we bear as those who would follow Jesus. Does it guarantee that we will be absolutely right 100% of the time? Not even close, but it

clearly demands that we not dose off, that we not become dulled to the deepest issues of justice, including the persistence of racial injustice, all around us.

Mark presents this teaching of Jesus to stay awake as among the last words Jesus delivered. In antiquity, writers often imagined what important figures would say at or near their deaths, assuming, I think correctly, that comments made at that point in the life cycle would be among the most important things the individual ever said. Mark uses a combination of this literary conceit, set alongside the apocalyptic imagery of his era, to speak of the coming of Jesus' death and the approaching end of all times. Mark's readers were primed to hear such language. The Jewish revolt had failed, the Temple had been destroyed, many Jews had died, and many others had joined the Diaspora beyond Jerusalem. In every way that mattered, they had already lived through a time when the sun had become dark, when the moon had given no light, when the stars had fallen from the skies. Who could blame anyone who checked out, dosed off, numbed him/herself in the midst of such despair?

And, yet, Jesus' words were clear to them: do not withdraw; keep awake, for God's action in the world is not yet done. Mark, the narrator, almost certainly believed that Jesus would literally and quite soon come again in a great final, catastrophic event to set all things right. Like all the early writers of the Christian movement, he was wrong; that did not happen. In the centuries following this time, Christians have had to grapple with living in the absence of this event, known to many as the Second Coming. Some believe that it is still a promise; others of us believe that the truth of Jesus' message lives beyond the apocalyptic genre of his time and that we are freed from fear of this kind of dramatic conclusion to life.

But the message has not lost its urgency. From these ancient words, we still are called to stay awake, not to watch for the approaching apocalypse but to live fully and presently in *this* moment, the moment we know we have. We don't live outside the world just because it is hard and complicated and sometimes discouraging. All that we know about Jesus' life teaches us that although he withdrew on occasion to refuel, as we must, he lived in the middle of it all—the good and the bad. And he did so with hope for humankind so passionate and compelling that all sorts and conditions of folks began to follow him and have never stopped—even on occasions when the sun seems to have gone dark!

On Friday, just a couple of days ago, a very bright light in the world shown from this very room. Most of you have heard about it: Crossroads Community Services and our community ministry opened wide the doors of St. Bart's for more than 250 homeless guests and almost as many paying supporters for a meal that will long be remembered. All of us agree that this great event does not mean that we as a community of God have arrived. Though it was an incredible one, it was just one meal—but it was a huge moment of light. For a few hours a lot of boundaries were torn away and a new burst of hope lived in our midst—not just hope that this event will become an annual one, but hope that the truth of what was modeled here in those moments can become the way we live in the world. If that could happen, we would find ourselves invigorated with a new kind of wakefulness and hope and vision that would make us so alive that we could look with honesty at Ferguson, Cleveland, Jackson, MS, and New York City—and not just look at these issues but commit to live our lives as people who will do all we can to “do justice, love mercy and walk with God.”

Though it is a huge calling to walk in the brightness of such light, it is where life is to be found. But to do it, to find it, we have to stay awake.

In the name of God: *Amen*.