

December 3, 2017

### The Advent Award

Over Thanksgiving I discovered a box of childhood memorabilia, mostly papers and artwork from school. In it was an award I received in pre-school. Psychologists report that awards at a young age are important in that they recognize and promote good behavior. However, psychologists make a special point that awards need to mark an achievement in process and not outcome. These awards—like a kindness award, hard worker, math whiz or responsible kid award—need to recognize a young student’s values and efforts not just in one display rather an effective award must *encourage* them to *continue* in that behavior.

The award I received in pre-school is obviously one I was proud of as it has lasted all these years. It is an award I have tried to improve on, though not always successfully. In pre-school I was one of those lucky children, I’m sure coveted by many, to receive the “good rester” award.

Recognized for my resting abilities from a young age, I quickly find myself defensive towards our gospel message at the beginning of this advent season to “keep awake.” Doctors tell us 7-8 hours of sleep is recommended and naps aren’t bad. Keeping awake, more popular with some of my peers, is not something I run toward with eager expectation. Yet here at the beginning of our church year, we are called to keep awake.

In this church year, Year B, our Advent gospel readings come from Mark. Chapter 13, as read today, gets categorized with other apocalyptic texts (not simply because it tells us not to sleep). Up to this point in the gospel tensions are rising and chapter 13 slows down to remind listeners there is a bigger picture and the end is not far off. It marks a shift in the gospel where the present narratives of Jesus’ life: his miracles, teachings and healing are set within a new framework. Suddenly in this chapter, the present becomes defined by the future. It is a shift in perception and worldview, focused now by what is to come.

Apocalypse means “uncovering” or “revelation.” In biblical works this is the invitation to other worlds, future worlds, the world in which all bow down to God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thurston, Bonnie Bowman. Preaching Mark. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2002. Page 144

And here, at the beginning of Advent, we are reminded that we are to keep awake, stay alert, because this revelation could come at any time. We do not know the hour. There is an *urgency* and unknowing about it all. Yet we are to stay alert as God could come to us at any moment and perhaps that time isn't far ahead of us at all.

This is the keeping awake of Advent. Thankfully, not literally an abstinence from sleep, but a posture, an attitude, an openness that God could reveal or uncover something in our life or the life of those around us at any time—while awake or asleep we are to be ready for God's entering in.

The parable used in the gospel is an image that can be helpful—one often referenced in contemplative prayer. The master leaves for a journey and gives to his servants their tasks and to the doorkeeper the task to guard the door. When we think of our hearts or minds or souls as doors that may be knocked on at any moment by God—suddenly we become a space that God can enter into. Also, this door is one we can elect to keep shut to God, afraid of that revelation or uncovering. Our defenses, pains and fears prevent us from opening the door but the doorkeeper is meant to let in what is of God. Our sleeping here is figurative for when we have forgotten how to open this door that leads us to where we know and meet God.

But Advent is the time we prepare for God's dwelling with us and among us and we *can invite* God into our lives. God is always with us but we don't know when God will come to us knocking, desiring to enter in in a new way, as he did into this world with Jesus. However, we can practice opening this door in preparation for God's entering in, for Christ's arrival—for which we do not set the time.

It is important for us to be ready that when Christ comes to us we are able to say "yes, please come in". It is important because we are now the church, which is the body of Christ and we are made up of how Christ dwells within each one of us. While advent seems like a lovely season of lights, greenery, and beautiful music it is also meant to be revolutionary. God enters into the world when he comes as a baby in Jesus Christ and God breaks into the world when we allow Christ into ourselves. We keep awake by preparing that the door be open for whenever Christ reveals or uncovers himself to be in our life in a new or unexpected way. There is some part in each of us that is a doorkeeper watching for Christ's return to our lives.

Today we begin our four-week Advent trek to the birth of Christ. There will, of course, be lovely celebrations, comforting stories of a baby in his manger, peaceful and holy nights but

we prepare for those times of comfort by opening ourselves to what God desires to reveal to us and *in* us this Advent season. This is meant to be our deepest joy, not a burden. Christ brings light into the world and we keep awake because he may enter into our hearts to carry that light at any time. So, while not always comfortable, this is Good news for all of us.

At the beginning of this Advent season, let us each be rewarded for the good work we have already done as followers of Christ: and now recognized for our outstanding ability to watch, to keep awake, and be prepared—remembering the award recognizes the process and not an outcome. May we be encouraged and hopeful that we can open the door at which Christ stands knocking.

I wish you all excellent resting—a peaceful and holy—Advent-tide, but also the hope and eagerness to stay awake for the one we all wait for. Who enters into our world in love, in meekness, in power and surprise.