

## Wake Up!

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:26-34

NOTE: As a rule sermons shouldn't be written on planes, trains, and Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn New York, but such was the nature of our Thanksgiving travels. So a sermon on the run was written mostly in New York:

Advent texts surprise us by holding contradictory thoughts in equal tension. Advent means beginning and the Matthew tells of the ending. Isaiah dreams of a future wrapped in peace – but dreams we associate with sleep and Matthew and Paul cry, “Wake up.” Contradiction. Welcome to Advent.

Question: Is it possible that Isaiah is the one who is most awake? And the rest of us – the practical, pragmatic people – are asleep. But if Isaiah is right, if God is making a world where making food trumps fighting, tanks are reconfigured as tractors, the minister of agriculture is more vital than the minister of war, the secretary of defense, or the director of the TSA. God has a feeding plan where not only will the hungry be fed, but children will no longer be slaughtered by the machine of war, where wheat farmers and bread farmers will have a higher stock value than bomb manufacturers and munition plant owners and missile builders, where silos will be filled with grain and not with nuclear attack weapons, where hearts are searched for compassion, justice, humility, and love instead of bodies searched for bombs and explosives. Welcome to Advent – where war is not welcome no matter how many flags we wave and how much bombastic rhetoric we bellow. At least in Advent we should be pacifists.

Jesuit priest and writer, Father Anthony de Mello says, “Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and beauty of this thing we call human existence. You know, all mystics are unanimous on one thing: that all is well, all is well. Though everything is a mess, all is well. Strange paradox, to be sure. But, tragically most people never get to see that all is well because they are asleep. They are having a nightmare.”

So Advent shows up right on schedule to sound the alarm, “Wake up.” We can set the alarm to “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” or to the blast of trumpets but this is our wake up call.

Faith demands a certain alertness and consciousness of us. Doris Betts, the novelist writes, that faith is not **"synonymous with certainty . . . (but) is the decision to keep your eyes open."**

Let me warn you that being awake to the whole world can be risky. Advent is not a sentimental season. What if faith is more risk than belief, more trusting one another? Paul had a companion named Epaphroditus, and he pays him the ultimate compliment: “**\*risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.**”

Again the contradictory thoughts: risk and normal life. There are moments and then there are moments. No one moment is more important than any other moment. Every moment is charged with possibility, with purpose, with meaning. Every moment is connected to every other moment. A magnificent acting performance doesn't just happen on stage during the show. It happens in every rehearsal. It happens in learning the part, in becoming the character. There's no way to separate the moments of rehearsal from the actual performance. We are what we practice.

Our texts pull all moments into one eternal moment. From moment to moment, we are to be awake, do our daily work, and when one of those moments produces something more, we are to embrace that moment and remember that all the preceding moments made this one happen.

Moment by moment we string a life together. Then after years and years of hard work, sweat, effort, a moment arrives, an unexpected moment, when we are invited to act and to act in risky ways.

On a summer morning I sat down on a hillside to think about God – a worthy pastime.  
Near me, I saw a single **cricket**;  
it was moving the grains on the hillside  
this way and that way.  
How great was its energy,  
how humble its effort.  
Let us hope  
it will always be like this,  
each of us going on  
in our inexplicable ways  
building the universe. (Mary Oliver)

Perhaps only a poet, searching for the meaning of soul in **the ear bone of a pilot whale** she found on a beach, can say it for us: “Beside me the gray sea . . . . I looked but I couldn't see anything through its dark-knit glare; yet don't we all know, the golden sand is there at the bottom, though our eyes have never seen it, nor can our hands ever catch it, lest we would sift it down into fractions, and facts certainties and what the soul is, also I believe I will never quite know, though I play at the edges of knowing, truly I know our part is not knowing, but looking, and touching, and loving, which is the way I walked on, softly, through the pale-pink morning light.”

There are some things beyond our knowing – locked away in a secret folder, marked FOR GOD'S EYES ONLY. The risk is wrapped in our not knowing. We only know as

we go. This was the first measurable act of faith in the history of the world. “And Abram went out not knowing where he was going.” And the even greater act of faith: Sarah went with him. Knowing only that he was going in the direction of a promise of a land flowing with milk and honey.

“Meanwhile the world goes on. Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on. Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like **the wild geese**, harsh and exciting over and over announcing your place in the family of things.” (Mary Oliver)

It is critical that we know that we are awake in each moment, each sliver of time charged with the energy, movement, and purposes of God. Have you, at any time, in the last decade, seriously considered changing your life? What if we were determined to come together as a body of believers, determined to do this one thing Jesus commanded? Wake up. Live in a state of discernment that has little to do with the weary ways of the world.

T. S. Eliott somewhere refers to the “breaking down of strong habitual barriers.” This may be the work of the church for today. Breaking down the strong habitual barriers that keep us from being fully awake, prepared to risk and sacrifice. This is the primary reason I am asking you to make a sacrifice in this year’s stewardship campaign. A tangible way of demonstrating that we actually are willing to risk, to sacrifice, to live. The idea of the tithe, not seriously entertained, or considered in so many years, sits here this morning as actual challenge. Instead of the usual rationalizations, let’s consider the challenge on its own merit. What led the Jews to give a tithe of their income? I suggest that the overwhelming sense of awe for the mighty acts of God in bringing the people of Israel out of slavery prompted the generosity of the Israelites. Jonathan Haidt, University of Virginia professor of psychology says that awe can be prompted by witnessing great acts of generosity. Dacher Keltner, psychology professor at UC Berkeley, says “The more nuanced emotions such as awe, compassion, forgiveness, and humility are what push us beyond self-interest and “wire us for good.” The tithe is a tangible sign of awe, worship, and humility.

"It is not every day," said Wallace Stevens, "that the world arranges itself into a poem." It is not every day that a group of people arrange themselves into a living, breathing, alive church centered in the purposes of God. Here’s my string theory: A lot of moments, a lot of years of hard work, concentration, and commitment, must be strung together in order to reach one moment of glory.

Eyes wide open, awake people offer new ways of seeing the world. For example, **Bill Gates**: “If we can find approaches that meet the needs of the poor in ways that generate profits for business and votes for politicians, we will have found a sustainable way to reduce inequity in the world. This task is open-ended. It can never be finished. But a conscious effort to answer this challenge will change the world. I am optimistic that we can do this, but I talk to skeptics who claim there is no hope. They say: ‘Inequity

has been with us since the beginning, and will be with us till the end—because people just... don't... care.' I completely disagree. I believe we have more caring than we know what to do with.”

**For example, Christopher Nolan**, spastic from birth, with his parents help, learned to strap a unicorn stick to his forehead and take 15 laborious minutes to type one word, and later published two highly praised prize-winning books. An Irish poet and novelist, he refused to let **cerebral palsy** **cerebral palsy** (səˈrēˈbrəlˌpɑːlˌzi), disability caused by brain damage before or during birth or in the first years, resulting in a loss of voluntary muscular control and coordination. get in the way of his writing.

If we are awake, there's nothing we can't accomplish! Awake! Awake! Advent has returned. The signs, as usual, are everywhere: a single cricket moving the grains of the hillside, building the universe, the ear bone of a centuries dead pilot whale perhaps containing the meaning of soul, wild geese offering us the world's imagination, calling to us harsh and exciting over and over announcing our place in the family of things; a trusted friend risking her life for us; the tithe announcing our loyalty to God; the wealthiest man in the world showing us another way; a severely crippled writer pecking a typewriter with a stick strapped to his head. Everywhere we turn there are people who really are awake. Our time has come. Will this be the year we wake up? Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!