

Year A, Advent 1
December 1, 2019
The Rev. Fred Devall

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42).

As someone who has a difficult time staying up late, I have always shuttered at this passage. I fall into the early to bed, early to rise category. Staying up late, no thanks. So one day I was puttering around the yard while listening to the radio show, “Hidden Brain”. Most of the show was about the health importance of getting a good eight hours of sleep each night. So, I was amazed to learn about people who defy the eight-hour rule and one in particular. When he was seventeen years old, Randy Gardner stayed awake for a world-record eleven days. When it was over he slept for eighteen hours. Ironically, Gardner now suffers from insomnia. He chalks it up to pay-back from the sleep gods.

Jesus, of course, is speaking about more than a good night’s rest. Being awake is a euphemism for being ready for the Lord’s return- the Second Coming. By ready, we mean that his return would provoke joy and not fear.

Most of us remember certain teachers who were fond of pop-quizzes. Starting the class with those harrowing words, “Please take out a pencil and a blank piece of paper” struck fear in the heart of many of us. We knew the outcome before the first question was asked. We were not ready. We were not prepared. The reason was probably something beyond sufficient sleep. No, in addition to being sleep deprived, we had spent our time doing other things that at the time seemed important- watching television, talking on the phone, or anything that might distract us from our homework.

While Jesus is not going to give us a pop-quiz, he is warning us not live distracted lives. We are to spend our time doing things that matter. “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away” (Matthew 24:38). Jesus was a guy that we liked to party. No more parties? Although he was not married, we know he went to weddings. No more weddings? We can still do these things, but Jesus is telling us to keep an eye on the horizon, to make provision for what might be. In essence we should build an ark, not a literal one, but a figurative one.

Before switching over to St. Martin’s Episcopal School, I attended grammar school uptown at Holy Name of Jesus. We walked seven or eight blocks to school each day. One day, we saw a man in his yard beginning to build something big. We watched it take form, wondering what he was doing. When the ribs finally took shape, we realized it was a boat- a big one. I suspect his neighbors were none too pleased to have a thirty foot boat being built so close, but it’s one of those things you never forget.

In building a figurative ark, there is only one thing to keep in mind- what vehicle, what vessel will help me survive the flood? What practice will keep me awake and alert for the unexpected hour? For Christians, the obvious answer is Jesus. He is the only way we can be saved.

Yet we live in a world where Christmas is less about God made flesh and more about consumerism. Being post-Thanksgiving, we have entered a new phase of the calendar, which the church calls Advent and the world calls Christmas or the holiday season. How do we navigate such a world? What practices will make me fully present? How can I be fully awake this Advent Season so that I gain a new perspective on Christmas? What unexpected joy may be awaiting me?

After getting burned more than a few times by pop-quizzes for which I was not prepared, I figured out the game. There were some classes that I could not show up for unprepared. You know what? It felt really good when I was not afraid when the teacher told us to pull out the pencil and blank sheet of paper.

Spending an Advent lighting the Advent wreath and saying prayers may be just such a preparatory practice. Or perhaps we might avail ourselves to daily morning or evening prayer?

Last week I was talking with a friend who was recently hired by his company to be head of wellness. In essence his job is to provide all the people in that company with the tools to stay healthy and continue to develop in their personal and professional lives. In church-speak, he is the director of Christian Formation. The take-away from our conversation was this- the thing that got you here, is not what will get to the next level. So maybe you like the idea of a holy Advent but are feeling somewhat stuck in your ark building project? It may be time to try something new this Advent. Whatever it is should take us past our ordinary routines, to wake us up to God at work in the world through the birth of a baby and a future return. *Amen.*