

At the end of this morning's Gospel reading (Mark 13), Jesus, in speaking about momentous changes soon to come, simply says, "Keep Awake!" Other translations say "Be Alert!" or simply "Watch!" Well, the translation that sticks in my memory most is "Be Alert." One of our very clever members, Cynthia, now passed on, used to say: "Be A-lert, because surely the world needs more Lerts!" Stay Awake, Be alert, Be Ready, Keep Watching, are all expressions for this time of Advent... a time of darkness (literally in Northern Hemisphere, and spiritually in the world)... a time of "darkness" when we try to maintain hope, faith, and positive attitudes.

First of all, let me remind us of the context in which Jesus is speaking. Jesus was actually reflecting on the misery of the Jewish people, under the oppression of Rome, and he was foreseeing the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of their Temple in 70 A.D. Surely Jesus was also considering his people's history of oppression, most notably their time of slavery in Egypt. So he uses imagery from the Jewish Scriptures about the "Day of the Lord," the prophesied day when their God would intervene in history to right all injustice, to take the powerful and tyrants off their thrones. The prophets said that before this "Day of the Lord," there would be a time of terror and trouble, that the world would be shaken to its foundations, judgment would come, and only then a new world, a new age of glory.

Most scholars that I've read agree that Jesus and the prophets before him said these things in visionary, metaphorical language. Statements like the "sun being turned to darkness" and the "moon to blood," and "there will be blood and fire and columns of smoke," if taken literally, have many people trying to match up certain wars or natural disasters, perhaps even this pandemic, with the end of the world. Those who take "apocalyptic" passages like this literally have camped out on mountain tops dressed in white, hoping to escape tribulation and be caught up into the clouds! But Jesus himself was clear that "nobody knows the day or time" that a powerful divine

intervention would happen. So to speculate about it is fruitless, a waste of time, and as one scholar said, blasphemous. For how could any mortals think we know end-of-world timelines, when even Jesus said that he and angels did not know... only God knew such things.

Taken symbolically and metaphorically, these “Day of the Lord” visions have psychological and spiritual truths. Sometimes terror and trouble do precede new awakenings, and may even be necessary to “wake us up” to things we need to address. Sometimes when there is deadly oppression all around, there needs to be blood, unfortunately, for people to wake up, to see injustice as atrocious, and work against it. Many have noted this in the wake of inhumane murders, such as George Floyd or Jamal Khashoggi. Jesus says Be Alert for signs. Where are necessary changes happening, towards more justice and peace, toward liberating those who are oppressed or caught in cycles of poverty or violence? Being Alert, means to see new light and life in a world full of injustice, and get on board to be part of the change. Although we would want God to intervene in powerful ways that shake up our world, we know that day to day, God usually works through human agents, through “messengers” walking this earth, (the meaning of the Greek word “angel.”)

So Keep awake, Be alert, Be watchful... this attitude also pertains to the “Second Coming” of Christ. Only literalists will climb a mountain and watch for signs of Jesus descending foot first from a cloud. I consider the teachings about Jesus coming back a second time as pointers to the presence of the Holy Spirit, the continuation of Jesus spirit, a “continual coming” of Jesus’ spirit. And since Jesus’ spirit came “in the flesh” it makes sense that the second, or third or “continual coming” of Jesus is also “in the flesh.” I return to the idea of angelic messengers; they are human beings, who walk in the way of Jesus, who walk in truth, grace, kindness, peacemaking, etc.

Today we have lit the candle of HOPE. We can keep watch for signs of light, signs of Christ, knowing that they may be small things!

We know that just one candle or one small flashlight beam can dispel darkness. And besides watching for Christ light, we can also light a candle ourselves in many ways. A few simple, small things: Yes, even the simple Cheer lights on homes can lift the spirit (and people are starting early since there is so much depression everywhere)... It gets dark so early now that my after-dinner walk is now a pre-supper walk; there is one condo on the river near Route 1 that has some sort of pre-dinner cocktail group, gathered around a lit Christmas tree on a patio. Stories and laughter, surely one way to support one another in difficult times! ... What about great memories? Even if the holidays are not as full as in times past, what about photos that bring up memories and stories? ... What about music? Surely there are ways to lift the spirit with favorite music... whether listening or playing... And many are finding a book to be a good pastime, a “silver lining” to spending more time indoors, and more time alone, as we avoid crowds and reduce times we gather in groups.

One book I’m enjoying recently is a meditative Advent book given to me... about what many animals do as winter approaches. Fascinating! Talk about learning something new everyday! Did you know that the “painted turtle” spends the winter at the bottom of ponds, buried in the mud, in a deep stillness where heart and breathing are slowed almost to a stop. Many animals are active all winter, but many go into some sort of hibernation... another one is the chipmunk! Who would have known... that while squirrels scamper about all winter finding food they have buried, chipmunks had stored food in tunnels underground, stay in the tunnels hibernating, and like the turtle, slow their heart and breathing to almost a stop, waking up for only brief periods eating.

We do of course learn things about ourselves by watching other life forms in nature. Perhaps it is natural that we put on a few pounds over these holidays and into the winter! Perhaps it is natural to limit our activities and our running around. Perhaps pandemic times are

just reinforcing the need as winter approaches to stop once in awhile, to take life slower, to find the blessings of quiet, meditation, some solitary time, or time with just a few others. One beautiful song by the St. Louis Jesuits I believe, says: “Holy Darkness, blessed night, heaven’s answer, hidden from our sight.”

So in these dark yet holy times, let’s find, or light one small candle! FINDING the light is Being Alert, Being Watchful, for what we call Grace: receiving, welcoming unexpected surprises of the Spirit. LIGHTING a candle, is what we initiate ourselves, maybe for ourselves, maybe for others. There are many silver linings to dark times; many have found little projects to do around the house... Rather than thinking about being “quarantined,” we could reframe our time at home as a “hibernating” time (learn from the animals... a time of rest and restoration). I know that one of my projects is to organize many piles and boxes of music! That beautiful song on Holy Darkness that I mentioned ... do you think I could find it??

One last thing, Holy Humor! It is often said that Humor is a form of Grace. We may as well Laugh as Cry. Or maybe some laughter helps us have a good cry! I have often followed the story of Michael J. Fox, especially his dealing with Parkinson’s disease. You may have seen him on the recent cover of People magazine... and in the article he keeps his sense of humor, saying: “I’ve been social distancing now for years, with the length of my arm and the length of my cane. Because of my unbalanced walking, I can slam into people unintentionally, so everyone needs to stay 6 feet away!”

Let’s Stay awake, Be alert (surely the world needs more “Lerts!”). Yes, let’s be watchful, for every in-breaking of the light of Christ, the way of love, forgiveness, peacemaking, truth telling, and humor, to lighten the spirit. And then of course find ways to also be a small light for others. Amen.