

Advent Training November 27, 2022

Many years ago, I served as a counselor at a summer camp in Pittsburgh. I was a counselor for teenage boys who were between 12 and 15 years old. One of the favorite activities of these kids when they had some free time was to play four-square.

And let me tell you, if four-square was an Olympic sport, these kids would've sported gold medals around their necks. They took the game seriously, and they were good. Any camper (or counselor) who was new to the camp quickly learned to stay on their toes, because the ball could come their way at any point, from behind-the-back no-look hits.

When someone got out during the game (when an opponent hit a ball into their square and then bounced out before the player could even react), the most common complaint was, "I wasn't ready!" At that point, one of the counselors would call out, "What's the number one rule in sports?" A chorus of campers' voices would respond, "Always be ready!"

And so you learned very quickly that as soon as you stepped into your square, you had to be ready.

That's the case in most sports, isn't it? Football players do drills where they run in place on their toes, waiting and listening for their coach's whistle, at which point they drop down to the ground instantly. They learn to always be ready to move. Wrestlers do a similar training exercise, circling around a sparring partner, and when the whistle blows, they dive in to attack.

Athletes do these drills over and over again to train their bodies and minds to be ready, so that they know what to do in a game. They are preparing to follow the #1 rule in sports: Always be ready.

I don't know how many sports Jesus played when he was growing up, but he gives his disciples the same message: "Always be ready." Keep awake, be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus says that when he comes again, it will be like a thief in the night, suddenly and without warning.

Think about the great flood, Jesus says. One day, the weather was fine and people were living their usual lives. Then the next day, the rain began, and the waters started washing away buildings and farms. Only Noah, who was prepared, who listened to God, was ready.

Jesus also gives an image that has supplied endless fodder for novels about the Rapture, like the *Left Behind* series: Two people will be together, in the field or grinding flour. One will be taken and one will be left. That's how sudden the coming of the Son of Man will be.

Now Jesus is talking about his own return, in the end days, what we call the Second Coming. The first coming was when Jesus was born in Bethlehem; the Second Coming will be his return. Jesus admits that even he himself doesn't know when it will be. It is a time when Christ will come again and set everything right in our world.

One Biblical commentator noted that we can easily get distracted by Jesus talking about the first coming at Christmas and the Second Coming that we hear about. The point is that our God is one who comes into our world. This idea of Emmanuel, God with us, is unique and powerful.

Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of Jesus. We prepare for the first coming (the celebration of the Nativity on Christmas); we hear various Bible passages about the Second Coming (Jesus' return). But even more, we look for the daily arrival of Christ in our lives. We believe that Jesus isn't just a historical figure but that he as God is present throughout our lives, if we pay attention.

Just as football players drill, just as four-square players practice their reactions, we as Christians use this season of Advent to practice our readiness. We do this in a number of ways:

- By quieting our lives, by making it a practice to stop running around and *doing* things to sit and be still.
 - We might do this by reading an Advent devotion every morning or evening
 - Lighting candles on an Advent wreath at home
 - Stopping to breathe for a few minutes
- By intentionally carving out time to pray
- By reading Scripture regularly
- By taking a retreat for a few days, a day, or maybe an hour
- By seeking out opportunities to serve others
 - at a soup kitchen
 - by shopping for presents for folks in need
 - by reaching out to a friend or family member we haven't spoken to in a while

Advent is a season to build up our ability to wait, to prepare, to be ready. And most often, that means changing our behavior to slow down and spend time with God.

In sports, if you fail to do your drills, if you become complacent, you lose games. You find yourself sitting on your heels while the opponent runs all over you.

In our faith life, if we fail to do our drills, if we don't work on how to be ready, we don't lose games. We miss seeing Jesus. We miss out on the moments of transformation that nourish our souls. And our faith life can devolve into rote performance without any of the sacred feeding our rituals.

We miss out on experiencing Jesus in a kind word with a stranger. We miss pausing to soak in the sunshine on a winter day. We forget to stop and appreciate just a moment of silence and peace in a busy season. We miss the beauty of buildings where we spend our time, and even the wonderful gifts of heat and running water that so many in the world don't have. We miss out on being grateful for God's blessings in our lives.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I watched a movie called *About Time*. The premise is that a man discovers that he can time travel to any point in his past and relive that moment. Shenanigans ensue as he pursues love with this quirky ability.

After many years, the character discovers the secret to happiness is this: He lives one day in his life normally. Then, at the end of the day, he time travels back to that morning and lives the day again. Without the anxiety and worrying about what the day will bring, he is able to appreciate the moments of simplicity and beauty that make up our existence: commiserating with a co-worker over a nasty comment from the boss, smiling at a considerate stranger, celebrating a small win at work, even enjoying a song that is being played on the headphones of a man sitting next to him on the subway.

About Time, directed by Richard Curtis (Universal Pictures, 2013), 2 hours, 3 minutes.

What beautiful moments do we miss because we are too busy? Because our concerns or fears are screaming in our head, while tender moments of grace are whispering to us? How often do we fail to notice Christ at work in our lives because we aren't looking?

Be ready. Advent is our boot camp for being prepared, for listening, for expecting Jesus to show up. It's a time when we engage in practices that help open our eyes to grace.

I'll close with a story (or proverb, really) by Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit priest, from his book "One Minute Wisdom." The story speaks to the uncontainable nature of divine experiences, and the importance of spiritual discipline.

A novice monk was getting frustrated with his spiritual exercises, and so he went to talk to the master monk. The novice asked the wiser, older monk, "Is there anything I can do to make myself Enlightened?"

The master replied, "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning."

The younger monk asked, "Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?"

"To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise."

Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom*, (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 11.

Amen.