

Awake!

December 3, 2023

Stir up your strength and come to help us.
Give us life..
Show the light of your countenance,
.....Says the psalm.

Isaiah refers to God waiting, and being hidden from us. It is rather sad. It feels like pleading.

Jesus says, 'In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. But He also says, 'MY WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY.'"

The word made flesh..... That is what we are waiting for. We are waiting and hoping and helping for Love to Overcome.

Welcome to the Blue, at this service, the shortest season and the start of the (our) church year. Sooner or later, each parishioner might notice the change of color signifying the change of the church season. Blue vestments, beautiful, handmade, draped over the altar rail, a blue frontal on the altar, and blue clergy stoles, still visible before the Eucharist.

Quite a while ago, maybe 20 years, I was relatively new to pastoral visitations, and was asked to see an older woman that I knew relatively well; she was an acquaintance of my mother. It is interesting that she came to my mind this month amidst the research and reading to prepare for Advent. I can picture, Mrs. Smith, let's call her, quite well, but especially I can feel her wise words, articulated speech and deep voice. Greeting her as I entered the hospital room, I had a program from the church service in my hand and presented it to her, saying, 'hello, I bring you prayers and hope. I just came from church'. She took the bulletin in her hand, laid her head back on the hospital pillow and closed her eyes. She sighed. Then she said, 'what color were the vestments, today?'. She paused, and further said, 'Tell me about the service.'

I had to think a minute. I was not focused on the vestments, nor really concerned about the church year, back then, but more into the secular seasons, with the weather changes. I told this lovely, impressive woman what I remembered about the service, especially the sermon, a hymn selection or two, and a few anecdotes about others in her age group. And thus, began my curiosity about the church seasons, and our colors, especially as compared to red and green in the wider society.

Mrs. Smith helped me grow when I thought I was going to give her hope and comfort. Funny how that happens. It never ceases to amaze me how God works.

I love Advent, more and more as I get older. There are so many themes to squeeze into 4 weeks. They say Advent is in the shadows – the stories of darkness where there is 'sadness, turmoil, war, hate and despair'. This is where we are called to be.... Help in the shadows where

there is need. This is where the church gives hope. Worship gives us weekly strength, guides us, and binds us.

Hope is like the release of the hostages. Hope where good efforts continue. Hope is where we hold each other up. Hope where we say thank you for the small things.

This year, like the quick season of Advent, we have the 'crisp, crackling' action-packed' (SALT) gospel of Mark, beginning today. Mark, with its distinct sense of urgency, was likely written during or after the revolt against the Roman imperial occupation in Palestine in the year 66-70 CE. The Jewish temple had been destroyed. Amidst this destruction, Mark's Gospel gives the message of Hope in the midst of catastrophe. Mark's gospel keeps us on our toes. In fact, Mark uses the word 'immediately' about 40 times in his gospel, which is about equal to the other three gospels combined. Mark stresses the importance of every event.

Today's reading, with its staccato words - Beware, keep alert, Keep awake - reminds me of a fond memory of my granddaughter, Abby, who is now 20, training to be a nurse. We were on a family trip at the beach and Abby was still in her crib. We were renting one of those upside down houses; her room was downstairs. A simple room with a place to change her – and the crib . The wooden blinds on the windows kept the room dark for naps; they were just right. We have many vibrant stories from that family trip, especially with her 2 cousins who wanted her to be their little sister. While Abby was taking her nap, I rested or read in a nearby room. I would hear her rustle in the crib as she came out of her sleep and started to move about. One day, I could see the top of her head as I peeked and enjoyed this precious moment – watching, wondering, waiting – wanting the right time to approach her to pick her up – before tears, or confusion in her new room. She slowly rolled over and pulled herself into a sitting position. She looked around, from left to right – at the windows, at a painting on the wall. And then she said – quite clearly – looking straight forward, as if into the air – she said 'AWAKE.' (that is it! Just awake!). And she looked again to the ceiling. A different tone of voice – 'awake'. ...?(question mark)..... Was she talking to someone, something? I was a bit stunned. Took a second.... I did not go IMMEDIATELY, but nearly immediately. Yes, it was time.... Time to walk in. Time for hope, and love and trust. Time to pick her up into warm arms. Time for comfort. JOY! Time for the angels.

We are here, this evening/morning, in counter-cultural fashion. They say churches are declining but ours is not. We are worshipping, not shopping. At least now. We are waiting to decorate – and because we know the story – we know the church will be lit in beauty on Christmas Eve. *(This is a place of warmth and caring and inspiration, teaching and preaching, feeding and sending, fellowship and healing. This is the place where we stay awake and gain strength.)*

Until then.... we receive the many messages in Advent, from the church and our secular society. It is our job to personalize the teaching of the church, to develop and deepen our relationship with Jesus. It is about life and death – and about death and life. It is about spirits and abstractions. It is about war and peace. It is about reality and hope.

We Episcopalians are an incarnational people. We see newness and growth and change even in the darkest places, even in the most mundane things, because Jesus is there. We await a good story, a Christmas story. We watch Charlie Brown on tv.

We try to understand these confusing readings during Advent – about end time – the apocalypse – so we go back in time, in history, only to see horrors happening again, and remember how awful it was at the time of Jesus' birth. How fraught the world was with cruelty..... how a king like Herod wanted to kill baby boys.....

When will Jesus come again, they were asking back then. Is that what is happening now? Is this an apocalypse. I do not know. But it is gruesome. And I know that our eyes are open and we are going to hope and move forward finding Jesus in the shadow.

St Paul reassures us in Corinthians – 'so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift'... as you wait.....God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And we are going to help each other, BE AWAKE!