

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The First Sunday of Advent/November 27, 2016

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Throughout the scriptures this morning is the admonition to stay awake. Sometimes life can become all too familiar. Perhaps it's our own fault. We want to know what to expect. We like to create a capacity for control. We end up finding control but losing meaning. We lose touch with surprise. Our ability to pay attention beyond the narrow focus of our daily round of living becomes dulled. In our self-absorption we lose a sense of compassionate attentiveness to the world around us.

Gwen Ifill died a week ago Monday. She was a journalist who hosted public broadcasting's News Hour. She once commented to David Brooks, the columnist for the New York Times, "that if she didn't go to church on Sunday she felt a little flatter for the whole week." Church for her awakened attention, meaning, surprise, the in-breaking of justice and peace, learning war no more, what the scriptures call the coming of the Son of Man, the raising up of each of us and the world in which we live. If she was going to give her full attention to the news of the world, Gwen Ifill needed church.

"Wake from sleep," Paul says, "for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." We know that the end of the world didn't come, but the goal for the world has. The purpose for which all was created is mending, oneness, the unique preciousness of each thing. It has all been raised. We might say raised into consciousness. Wake up, Paul says.

Perhaps Paul was prompted by the words of Jesus that the Gospel of Matthew captured later. By that time Jerusalem had been destroyed. Indeed, one had been taken, another left. No one knows how many died. "Keep awake therefore." If one had known the hour that the thief would come, who would

steal the unique preciousness of each, divide the spoils, break apart the oneness of all, then the owner would have stayed awake to prevent it from happening.

Then Jesus flips this image. Just as conquest and thievery can catch us unawares, even so (perhaps more so) the Son of Man will come at an unexpected hour. Jesus is referring to the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament which for him would have been his Bible. There it says, “As I watched in the night visions” – Daniel is not dulled by darkness, but alert. He goes on: “I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One.” He is not coming to earth (which is what we usually assume, but pay attention) he is being presented before God. There the son of man receives dominion, glory, and kingship, “that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion.” Be mindful then that all things hold together in Christ. They are one. All is reconciled. Be on the lookout for life’s preciousness. The lowly are being raised up, presented with their ruler before God. Peace is made; “nation shall not lift up sword against nation.” Be ready to act on these things which express the purpose for which all was made.

This readiness recalls the beginning of each spiritual journey. In the 12th century, an Augustinian by the name of Hugh of St. Victor, made an adjustment to how we think about the spiritual journey. He said before we can take the first step which is the way of purgation, the letting go of things like control, self-absorption, expectations, we have to have an awakening. The competing desires of the world form such a flood that deafens the spirit. This is the language of Noah mentioned in the gospel. The competing desires of eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage dulled each spirit so that they knew nothing until the flood came. Hugh plays out the image. The person in this inattentive, flat state of mind is not even aware that there is another way to live that is mindful, attuned to peace, to the dwelling of God. Before a single step can be taken Hugh says, there must be an awakening that restores a sense of proportion, a proper perspective, and a desire for God. Hugh argues that, “The restoration of (a person) begins with the awakening of the soul which has forgotten its true nature and its true good.” Awakening entails our awareness of the awesome otherness of God. This is our experience of the holy. We may

discover sorrow at having been alienated from or asleep to the mystery of God's deep love. And what is awakened in us is love, a longing for home, our true place in the presence of God. The Son of Man in his coming presents us before God. We are lifted up and made new.

Hugh's 12th century notion of awakening is being given a face-lift by the 21st century slang term "woke," a word that is being taken up by the Black Lives Matter movement. I am not wanting to appropriate this language; just point to it as another instance of the importance of being awake. Being woke is knowing what is going on in the community, where the danger is, who is likely to bring it, and in the presence of negation affirming that life matters. To "stay woke" is being keenly aware of social justice and of one's inherent dignity. The African-American Jesus in the 21st century might say "Stay woke for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." That which others have shamed, those who are woke, know to be beautiful. What has been cast down is being raised up. Helplessness and a flat affect are replaced with loving zeal and attention.

So, spanning the centuries, in diverse communities, a common thread is the need to be awake. Each journey does not begin with a single step as the saying goes, but with an awakening. Yogi Berra who, depending on who you talk to, was either very awake or clueless once said, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else." And Lewis Carroll writer of Alice in Wonderland is often paraphrased, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there." Clearly, we need an awakening or to "stay woke" before we begin.

That is one of the very important purposes for gathering each Sunday in church. Without it, as Gwen Ifill noticed, the whole week is a little flatter. Without worship we are less awake to what is happening about us, and to the purpose for which we are created. Church, which we sometimes allow to be rote and too familiar, will shock us and surprise us if we let the words and actions speak to us with an awakened heart. Then our destiny becomes clear. The Son of Man is coming to the Ancient One. And we are brought with him to the Father in whose house there are many dwelling places, a place for each. So wake from sleep, Paul says. "Keep awake," Jesus teaches. Awaken your

soul, instructs Hugh of St. Victor. “Stay woke,” shouts Black Lives Matter. Then let the journey begin.

Amen.