

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

November 28, 2010
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 2:1-5
 Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14
 Matthew 24:36-44

Sleepers, wake!

“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” [Romans 13:11]

A few weeks ago, a group of parishioners sat around a table in the Parish Hall, talking about the creeds. It was a Wednesday night, and it was Nancy Lowry’s idea (thank you, Nancy). At her suggestion, we organized an adult ed. series that gave participants a chance to talk about how we make sense of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and where the creeds baffle or trouble us. As you can imagine, it was a lively conversation. At one point, some of us started discussing which line of the Nicene Creed was currently our favorite, and why. I jumped into the fray and named my favorite line: “we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

Why do I love that line? Because it orients me toward the future with an attitude of expectation and hope. Because it tells me where to focus my attention, so that I keep watch for the in-breaking realm of God. What do we look for? “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” We look for signs of divine power, for unexpected, life-giving words of kindness or forgiveness, for the grace-filled “coincidence,” for the act of selfless courage or the gentle hand that reaches out to clasp a neighbor’s hand. We look for the dawning realization that everything is connected and that I am kin with all that is. God is coming toward us from the future, inviting us to enlarge our minds, to see with new eyes, and to stay awake.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new church year, and, as one preacher puts it: “part of what we do during this season is to prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ as a baby in Bethlehem. But that is not where we start on this Sunday. We do not start at the beginning of the story. We start at the end.”¹

¹ The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter, “November 28, 2010 -- First Sunday of Advent,” Sermons that Work, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_125656_ENG_HTML.htm/

We start the Advent season by looking to the end of time -- to the last great day when Christ will come again in glory, and everything in heaven and on earth will be gathered up in love. The prophet Isaiah evokes in stirring terms the future that awaits us. All the peoples of the earth will draw together and worship the one God, and God will “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” [Isaiah 2: 4b]. It is a powerful vision, a vision of ultimate peace and hope that rings deeply in the human heart.

When will that great day come? We do not know. Jesus himself warns that no one knows the details, no one holds the map or the time-table that can tell us exactly when and how the reign of God will finally be accomplished – not the angels of heaven, not Jesus himself, but only God the Father. But we do know this: at some unexpected moment, that day will come. So we must stay awake. “You know what time it is,” Paul says. “It is now the moment to wake from sleep” [Romans 13:11]. God will come among us, Jesus says in today’s Gospel, as unexpectedly as a flood, as decisively as a kidnapper, as secretly as a thief. These disturbing images shake us up, and that’s the point: God may break in at any moment, so at every moment we must be ready to welcome God. “Keep awake therefore,” says Jesus, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” [Matthew 24:42].

Later on, St. Paul will soften Jesus’ imagery, saying that God will come like a thief only to those who are not prepared to meet God; presumably those who do love God will greet God’s coming with joy [c.f. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11]. But in any case, the injunction to wake up and stay awake is repeated throughout the New Testament. We hear it elsewhere in the Gospels, in First Thessalonians [1 Thessalonians 5:6-8], the Book of Revelation [Rev. 3:1-3; 16:15], and Ephesians, which gives our next hymn its opening words: “Sleepers, wake!” [Ephesians 5:13; Hymn #71].

Other religious traditions also urge their followers to awake from sleep. I think, for instance, of a story about the Buddha. It seems that soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on a road. The man marveled at the Buddha’s radiance and serenity, and he asked, “Who are you? Are you a god?”

“No,” said the Buddha.

“Are you a wizard or magician?”

“No,” said the Buddha.

“Then what are you?” asked the man.

“I am awake,” the Buddha replied.

The word *Buddha* means “awakened one,” and every one of us is called to be awake.

Please don't misunderstand. I have nothing against sleep. I function best if at night I manage to get eight hours of sleep, and my family would be the first to tell you that I am a nicer person when I do. Dreaming is also important -- many of us learn what is going on within us when we pay attention to our dreams, and dreams may even convey messages from God. Sleep is good, and dreams are good -- but not sleepwalking or daydreaming through our lives.

How many ways are there to fall asleep? I bet we could come up with a hundred. Take habits, for instance. Habits can put us to sleep. They can dull our awareness and close down our perception. Again, I want to be honest here: I love my habits. I'm a creature of habit. Habits give a reassuring order to my day, a pleasant sense of stability. But doing things the same way day after day can also be a way to fall asleep.

Case in point: for twenty years I lived in Watertown, a suburb of metropolitan Boston, and I often went out jogging. The nearest bit of nature from our front door was the Charles River, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away. For twenty years I would leave the house, run down the hill, turn right on Mount Auburn Street, reach the bridge at Watertown Square, turn left at the river and run east, making a big loop counter-clockwise that circled me back to my house about an hour later. I ran this route day after day, season after season, year after year, and I got to know it like the back of my hand. I knew every storefront, every donut shop and driveway. I knew where to watch for cracks in the sidewalk, where to spot the ducks, and at which curve of the river I was likely to catch the wind in my face.

Finally the time came to make our big move to the Pioneer Valley. With excitement, my family and I began to uproot our selves, and we started packing up our belongings. On our last day in Watertown, I went out for a farewell run. As always, I headed out the front door and down the hill. But for some reason, this time I changed direction. Instead of turning right, as I had for twenty years, I turned left. It was the identical route, but now I was running it clockwise, and to my astonishment, everything looked different and new, as if I had never seen it before. I had never noticed that tree, never spotted that arrangement of houses, never realized that the angle of light changed at that particular corner of the road. I had been busily running that course for years, but I might as well have been running it in my sleep.

That's a pretty harmless example, but it got me to wondering: What else was I doing in my sleep? Where else was I sleepwalking? What else had I missed? When I want to remember what it means to be awake, I go to my bookshelf, pull out *Walden*, and immerse myself in Thoreau's brilliant, cranky, and opinionated quest to wake up and cut through the torpor, fantasy, and illusion of daily life. I agree

with his bracing assessment that “We are sound asleep nearly half our time.”² And I relish his provocative suggestion, “To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?”³

How awake, I ask myself, am I willing to be?

Thoreau was not in any conventional sense a religious man, but he had his own way of looking for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. He writes, “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn...”⁴

Both religious and non-religious thinkers clamor for human beings to wake up, and never has that call been more urgent than it is now. What spell has befallen us so that we assault the life-systems on this planet that keep our species and all other species alive? What will it take for us to wake up, and to see through the illusion that we have all the time in the world, that the world’s (quote unquote) “resources” have no limits, and that we can mine and drill, log and burn, get and spend as much as we please? Can we help each other to awaken, and find ways to bring forth on this planet a human presence that is “environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling, and socially just”?⁵ That is great work, indeed -- a high calling.

Where have you fallen asleep? Where are you bound up in habit, dulled by routine, awash in trivia?

Here are three suggestions for an awakened Advent.

1) Cultivate an attitude of expectancy. Today is a brand new day, a clean slate, an open field of fresh possibilities. How will God show up today?

2) Take a good look at your life. Make room for self-examination. Where do *you* need to “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” [Romans 13: 12]? Where do you need to relinquish old habits of egotism and greed, of violence and unkindness – the old patterns, as Paul says [Romans 13:13], of drunkenness, quarreling, and jealousy?

3) Make space for solitude and silence. Nothing is so like God as silence. Nothing opens our hearts or awakens our minds more surely than “the silence of eternity interpreted by love.”⁶ Drop in on the Rector’s Contemplative Bible Study

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *The Portable Thoreau*, edited, and with an introduction, by Carl Bode, New York: Viking Press, 1947, 1962, p. 570.

³ Ibid, p. 343

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Visit The Pachamama Alliance: <http://www.pachamama.org/>

⁶ John Greenleaf Whittier, from Hymn #652, “Dear Lord and Father of mankind”

that will meet tomorrow and every Monday afternoon for silent meditation on the Gospels. Check out Bill Holladay's new Wednesday night series on praying through Advent with the prophet Isaiah.

Now is the time to abandon whatever stupefies us and puts us to sleep.

Now is the time to look ahead with hope, for "the night is far gone, the day is near" [Romans 13:12].

Grab the smelling salts! Sleepers, wake! Today, and every day, we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.