

Church of the Crossroads
First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2007
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“SLEEPERS, AWAKE!”

Isaiah 2:1–5
Psalm 122
Romans 12:11–14
Matthew 24:36–44

The readings for this First Sunday of Advent draw from the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. On a day when we celebrate the beginning of a new church year, we find ourselves in the midst of passages describing the end times. Now, progressive Christianity has never quite known what to do with these kinds of readings. Apocalyptic literature has been taken over by fundamentalist Christians who see it literally as a prescription for the end of history. At best, progressive Christians have at times viewed a passage like the one we heard from Isaiah as an encouragement in the struggle for peace:

they shall 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. —Isa 2:4

Perhaps, however, we should not so quickly dismiss or domesticate passages that describe the end times, including the second coming of Christ. It might be better to consider them as readings that simply point to a future of hope, and also passages that celebrate the transformative power of the Spirit that continually works in each and every moment to bring about a measure of new life in the world.

As some of you know, a favorite poem of mine is a poem written by Czeslaw Milosz and entitled *A Song on the End of the World*.

*On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.*

*On the day the world ends
 Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
 A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
 Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
 And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
 The voice of a violin lasts in the air
 And leads into a starry night.*

*And those who expected lightning and thunder
 Are disappointed.
 And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
 Do not believe it is happening now.
 As long as the sun and the moon are above,
 As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
 As long as rosy infants are born
 No one believes it is happening now.*

*Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
 Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
 Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
 There will be no other end of the world,
 There will be no other end of the world.¹*

Amazingly, that poem was written in Warsaw in the year 1944. The poem declares that the end of the world occurs in not some future time filled with cataclysmic occurrences but rather in each and every moment and that possibilities for transformation occur each and every moment for those who have eyes to see. Or, at least this is how I understand the poem.

The key condition that is needed for the recognizing of the Spirit's transforming work in each and every moment is surely wakefulness. Those who are asleep, like the sleepy drunkard at the edge of the lawn in the poem, will surely miss the opportunities for newness that God brings us each moment of our lives. The scriptures for today point to the necessity of wakefulness. Writes the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome,

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to

¹ Milosz, *The Collected Poems*. New York: The Echo Press, 1988. 56.

us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone,
the day is near.

—Rom 13:11–12a

And the passage from Matthew, after Jesus declares that no one can know when the end will come (so much for all those predictions announced by the TV fundamentalist preachers), he advises everyone to keep awake:

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this, if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

—Mt 24:42–44

To be sure, this call to wakefulness is found in Matthew’s apocalyptic vision, which anticipates the Second Coming of Christ, but it surely can apply also to each and every moment of our lives.

The Advent command is truly, “Sleepers, Awake!” The truth is that sleepiness is the enemy of our participation in God’s transforming work. For if God presents us an opportunity for newness and we fail to respond because we are asleep, that opportunity may well pass us by.

What can we say about the society in which we live? Surely, that it is asleep. It refuses to wake up to the hidden despair that underlies the fabric of our North American experience. The despair is hidden but real. Although the media still mirrors the official optimism of the culture, Americans as well as people throughout the world are genuinely concerned about the future. Are we destined to have a future filled with more and more wars like the Iraq War? Are we willing to bequeath an Iraq War debt of 2 trillion dollars to those who come after us? Are the effects of global warming going to place in jeopardy the lives of our children and our children’s children?

Advent speaks to the hidden despair of people everywhere and delivers a word of hope. For God’s transforming action is even now, at this moment, breaking in upon our world.

The call of Advent calls us to “wake up” from a sleepiness that has a potential of overcoming us. That sleepiness was noted in a recent speech by

Mayor Ross Anderson of Salt Lake City on October 27th of this year. In his powerful and remarkable speech, which described the tragic state of affairs in the nation and world, he said the following:

We must avoid the trap of focusing the blame solely upon President Bush and Vice-President Cheney. This is not just about a few people who have wronged our country—and the world. They were enabled by members of both parties in Congress; they were enabled by the pathetic mainstream news media, and, ultimately, they have been enabled by the American people—40% of whom are so ill-informed they still think Iraq was behind the 9/11 attacks—a people who know and care more about baseball statistics and which drunken starlets are wearing underwear than they know and care about the atrocities being committed every single day in our name by a government for which we need to take responsibility.²

Rather than waking up to the state of affairs in our world, we continue to distract ourselves with Christmas shopping and O. J. Simpson, and whether or not Scott Peterson “did in” his third wife Laci. A recent cartoon in the *New Yorker* (Nov. 12) says it all. A husband and wife are seated on either end of a long dinner table, and she says to him, “I saw the most fascinating picture of a celebrity getting a cup of coffee today.” Talk about being asleep.

Sleepers, awake! This is the cry of Advent. Despair that is hidden can cause us to fall asleep; thereby closing us off to the newness and hope God offers us and our world in each and every moment. Truly, Advent, which anticipates God’s transforming work, can awaken us to the hidden despair that resides under the surface of our lives, for it is in the midst of *acknowledged* despair, despair that is both recognized and confessed, that the gift of hope and newness of life are given.

So let us be awake. The good news of Advent is that Christ is coming. Christ is always coming. In each and every moment, in the midst of the despair that besets us and all people everywhere, let us in hope be ready to welcome him into our hearts and lives, and so know the God who even now seeks to make all things new. Amen.

² From the internet, ECAPC (Each Church a Peace Church)