

Advent 1B (12/3/2017)

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

“Keep awake,” Jesus urges his followers, insisting that we remain attentive as we wait for the Lord. But, isn’t the problem instead that we are already hyper-alert, preoccupied with so many concerns that it’s hard to focus on any one important thing?

Do we really need a reminder to “keep awake” during the holiday season? Given all that needs to get done at home, in school, at work, and in the community before Christmas, wouldn’t we benefit instead from a reminder to “slow down, relax, and get plenty of rest”? Our Gospel from Mark today encourages us to remain attentive as we wait for the Lord: “Keep awake,” Jesus urges, “for you do not know when the master of the house will come... or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.” But, isn’t the problem actually that we are overly attentive at this time of year, so caught up in the frenzy of the season – over and above the demands of our normal routines – that we can hardly pause to take a breath?

And, when we’re not busy with holiday shopping, family traditions, or other mandatory fun, we readily turn our attention to the frenzy of the wider world – political crises, mass violence, pervasive sexual harassment and abuse – all the chronic symptoms of human brokenness that make us wonder if our Christmas cheer is really just a charade. **“Keep awake,” Jesus insists on this**

first Sunday of Advent. But, aren't we already hyper-alert, preoccupied with so many concerns that it's hard to focus on any one important thing?

In fact, this is what Jesus is getting at in his "little apocalypse" in the thirteenth chapter of Mark. The church year begins near the end of the story, as Jesus draws on common apocalyptic imagery to comfort his disciples with the promise of his return: "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." *Then*, he assures them, *I'll return to you to fulfill the purpose of my birth in Bethlehem, my life with you, my crucifixion, and my resurrection.*

But, what about all the distress in the interim? Widespread suffering, vanishing light, and collapsing skies – these symbols reflect so much instability and fear. And, aren't we tempted to conclude that instability and fear are the end-all and be-all of this life? But Jesus' prophecy insists on hope. **Crisis and cataclysm afflict every generation, but they must not tear our focus away from the defining promise: God's saving presence with us.**

During the season of Advent, of course, we prepare to hear again the story of God's presence with us in the flesh and blood of an infant. Amid all the hustle and bustle, amid all the turbulence, there is a silent night. **God slips into human life in the most improbable way, with no sky-shattering**

display, but with the wail of a newborn, wrapped in humble clothes and lying in a feed trough. And, apart from Mary and Joseph, no one is alert to his arrival.

The seventh and last installment of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series tells the story of the final confrontation between good and evil in the wizarding world. Harry and his two closest friends, Ron and Hermione, forego their last year in prep school to search the farthest corners of Great Britain for Harry's nemesis, the embodiment of evil and the world's greatest threat, Lord Voldemort. But, in their pursuit of clues that might lead to Voldemort's demise, the three friends quickly come up empty, roving the countryside aimlessly for weeks until Ron's frustration boils over and he abandons the other two. It was always going to be Ron.... Demoralized, Harry and Hermione nevertheless carry on. And eventually, they discover a reason to hunt for their next clue in Godric's Hollow, the village where Harry would have grown up if not for Voldemort's fatal attack on his parents in his infancy. Fearing that Voldemort might anticipate Harry's homecoming, they disguise themselves and arrive in Godric's Hollow under the cover of night. With snow blanketing the ground, Harry and Hermione creep toward the center of the village. And, peering across the town square at the little village church, its "stained-glass windows glowing jewel-bright," they hear a carol start up inside.

"Harry, I think it's Christmas Eve!" Hermione exclaims.

“Is it?” Harry replies, having lost track of time in the course of all their wandering.

“I’m sure it is.”¹

Amid Voldemort’s campaign of terror, amid the loss of their trusted friend, amid their own fears and frustrations, Harry and Hermione are not alert to Christmas. Nevertheless, Christmas comes to them in the simplicity of church light and familiar music. ***Keep awake, Jesus might have said to them in that moment, pay attention to the hope at the heart of my story.***

Of course, God not only comes near to us in the baby Jesus. The first incarnation prefigures all the other ways God shows up in our lives, whether we are paying attention or not. ***No matter how wakeful we are to worldly concerns, in Advent – as at other times – we may be asleep to God.² So, keep awake, Jesus insists, train your hearts on the ways God is entering your life in this time, and cling to the promise that God will remain with you in the seasons to come, even to the end of time.***

Dear church, this is the kind of watchfulness that guards against the frenzy of the holiday season and the frenzy of the wider world alike, giving us eyes to perceive God ever at work among us to give us grace and peace.

¹ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 323.

² See Lillian Daniel, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 22.