

Still, Still, Still.

The unsung refrain from this evocative Austrian Carol sets the tone for this season, appropriately called Advent, the awaiting, the anticipated coming, the hoping. Yet still. Always still.

In the northern hemisphere, we do this awaiting in winter, as we have tasted this past week with frigid early morning temperatures and hoarfrost on the groundcover. For us, the liturgical season and the natural season seem bonded. Evening darkness begins early, and mere glimmers of light in the eastern sky herald morning. Seems perfect for Advent.

This holy season invites into a posture, one of silence and the atmosphere for this posture: darkness, darkness of a particular kind.

In this apocalyptically charged chapter we heard this morning from Mark's Gospel, one quite intentionally placed in the Lectionary for this, the first Sunday of Advent, a stark Jesus warns:

*In those days, after that time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will come falling from heaven and the powers in heaven will be shaken.*

At best, we hope he is speaking in metaphor.

The subsequent last lines have Jesus giving an unusually clear instruction: Be on your guard! *Stay awake!* Four times: *Stay Awake. Stay Awake. Stay awake. Stay awake.*

No metaphor here. Just *stay awake!*

I assume Jesus is not talking about waking up at the ultra-dark hour of 3:00 a.m. when one can suddenly seem to be —somehow—totally alert. No, that's a good time to go back to sleep.

Jesus' instruction to *Stay Awake!* is about a different order of things, a different endeavor for us. It is, I sense, an invitation to go inside, to go dark, if you will, to cast aside the *personae* which we inhabit, and instead, present ourselves, naked, to that which dwells within, that which cannot be easily seen or felt or known if we're not awake!

In the Advents of my childhood, enchanted with the Advent wreaths both at home and in my homely parish as I was, I also loved the Yuletide cards that came each day. My favorites were of the three magicians, if you will, usually depicted under a dark blue night sky, one speckled with stars, these three wanderers with only an intuition that their future lay somewhere ahead. They traversed the desert, with what navigational skills they had, and a distinct star— perhaps Arcturus, maybe Venus, but one amid the billions— to guide them.

They moved, on their steady camels, in the abiding silence of the Middle Eastern sands, necessarily awake, yet in the still dark of night, hoping for that which they did not yet know.

This feels like our journey, too.

Carl Jung says: *who looks outside dreams, who looks inside awakes.*

Dreaming is good, but Jesus says: *Stay awake.*

Following the instruction of the Sublime Teacher, one might well ask: what does this *awake* mean? And why *dark*? Why *silent*? Why still. And why *inside*? What exactly are we called to do?

One night several years ago, I was reading and deep in the text, my eyes fell upon these words: *Change your life!*

It might have well have been the Archangel Gabriel appearing in my bedroom as I read this *instruction*. I had been grappling for a while, and the one place I thought I had fully illuminated, with my spiritual practice, had actually *not* been fully attended. For it lay deep inside.

I knew I was called to go to a deeper place, one that I had a certain dread of approaching, that center which I intuited was dark, that would require of me to cease the conversation, and be still. To sit in silence.

In the *English Patient*, author Michael Ondaatje remarks of his main character: *He talked non-stop to keep the darkness at bay.*

The three desert wanderers, to which we could add the likes of us, were invited to become fully conscious, trusting a deeper reality, one that required them to be awake, in order to come to life. Real life. Their journey through the desert lasted some weeks, maybe four, like the week on which we embark today, amid the echoing silence of the barren scape, theirs, and ours.

Like these three, we are called to follow that internal anchoring star, to become, and then stay, still, and awake to the world around us, all of the world around us, the splendor and the beauty and the unaccountably intense joy. And the squalor, the suffering, including our own, and the yoke of violence that haunts this planet.

Awake to all of this: the majestic oaks and the polluted oceans, the grandeur of Tahoe as well as the desolation haunting the Holy Lands, awake to friendship and so too, to alienation. Awake to all of it. For *the all of it* is essential.

Jesus repeats himself four times. Perhaps because he knows we are a stubborn lot, we humans.

And yet, for what more might he is he asking, instructing, compelling us to stay awake?

Theologians assert these words from Mark foreshadow the Second Coming, usually thought of some distant time, far in the future.

I think not.

Thomas Merton says *In Advent, we celebrate the coming and indeed the presence of Christ in the world. God does not call us to flee from this imperfect and hurting world but rather to enter it more deeply. Our task is to find Christ in our world as it is, not as it might be.* And I would add, as we are, and not as we might be.

I sense Jesus is asking us to be awake to the world, and further, to become his face, his feet and his hands in this world, to advent the second coming.

My sense is the second coming is already among us, is with us, is in us, like the cosmos in which we dwell, always evolving. Paul says the whole universe has been groaning, as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time. Groaning to awaken, groaning to come alive, groaning ultimately—if unknowingly—to be taken into the very person of Jesus, the Christ, as we take him into us each Sunday, this Sunday, as we receive this incomprehensible yet indescribably vivifying sacrament.

Every time we kneel at the rail, we are hoping to be transformed, hoping to dwell, and as the Anglo-Catholic mystic, Evelyn Underhill penned early in the last century, by a *love that carries us above all things into the Divine Darkness*.

Perhaps counterintuitively, we wake up as we go deeper inside, into silence, into the dark, for it is here where this love, intimate to the One to which we are inextricably drawn, where the Spirit abides, where the light is inextinguishable. To journey there requires embracing the silence and the dark, so we might hear, with a previously unimagined clarity, the intimacies our God would share with us. Intimacies that change lives, ours and all those we encounter. Intimacies that change the world.

In this second coming, ironically yoked to this advent, we become the face of the Christ longed for, if by another name, by this groaning humankind.

This Advent, beginning this cold morning, consider this is the time to open up our lives, not by our own devices, as we are usually wont to do, but by allowing ourselves to spend these four weeks moving inside, in the dark silence of God, so we might be present to whatever it is required of us in order to let go of, or be forgiven for, or embraced by, so we might reach this month-long trek's end: this baby in swaddling—vulnerable, open, trusting, alive and awake. Which is exactly what we are each called to be. Which is exactly what this deeply wounded world needs.

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