



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Sidnie White Crawford
Sermon for Advent 2007
St. Mark's on the Campus
December 2, 2007

Wake up! Wake up! Are you awake? Just as the weather turns really cold, the days get darker and darker, the first storm of the season has arrived, and what we really want to do, in the words of Clement Clarke Moore, is “settle our brains for a long winter’s nap,” here comes St. Paul this morning, the first Sunday in Advent, telling us “NOW is the time to wake from sleep!” “Go away!” you may want to say. “I’ll wake up sometime in April, after the winter goes away and all this holiday nonsense is over.” Bah humbug, in the words of Ebenezer Scrooge.

Or maybe, on this December 2, you have the opposite reaction. “Now is the time to wake from sleep? What do you mean, now? I’m wide-awake. I’ve got a tree to trim, presents to wrap, dinner to cook, cookies to bake, concerts to sing, parties to attend, grades to finish, services to prepare- phew! I’m so wired, I may never sleep again!”

Well, whether we are imitating Ebenezer Scrooge or the Energizer Bunny in our daily lives right now, we are missing Paul’s point, and also a great opportunity in our spiritual lives. Advent bids us to wake from our spiritual sleep, the sleep that steals over us when the outside world demands all our energy and time, and we tell our spiritual side to go hibernate for a while, maybe until Lent. But Advent asks our spirits to wake up and really listen for God within ourselves. How does Advent teach us to do this?

Every year at this time, the church becomes its most counter-cultural. Outside, Christmas is in full swing. Lights are up, trees are decorated, Bing Crosby is singing, and, of course, the advertising message of “buy, buy, buy!” is drummed endlessly into our heads. Inside, the church is darker, the color is purple, the hymns are somber, and the lessons are exhorting us to wait, to slow down, to look within. To prepare. To wake up. To be ready for the time. What time? What are we to be awake for?

Those questions get at the heart of the mystery of Advent. As Father Jerry pointed out in this month’s Roar, Advent anticipates both the Incarnation, the coming of God among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Parousia, the coming of the Risen Christ in glory to inaugurate the kingdom of God. We tend to think about these two events as separate: first Jesus was born, lived as a man, died on the cross, rose, and ascended into heaven. Sometime in the future he will come again, to judge the living and the dead. And we really don’t worry too much about the second event. It’s kind of amorphous, and we’re perfectly happy to leave it that way.

But if we think that way, we are missing an important truth. Incarnation and Parousia are not two separate, either/or events. They are rather both/and, the same event. You see, when the Incarnation happens, when Jesus is born, the kingdom of God is inaugurated right then and there, and it continues to exist, always, among the community of believers. That’s us. We are the embodiment of God’s kingdom on earth. So when Jesus Christ returns to earth in a bodily form, it won’t be to start something brand new; it will be to bring to perfection that which already is. That which we already are. The kingdom of God, right here, right now. Incarnation. Parousia. Then/Now. Already/Not yet. That is the mystery of the church, the body of Christ.

Now, you may be thinking, “well, this is a pretty poor excuse for a kingdom, especially God’s kingdom! This kingdom is in pretty bad shape. Look at the state the world is in!” Well, I’m not going to argue about that! But that’s exactly why we need to listen to Paul’s message today: “NOW is the time to wake from sleep!” Be ready. Be prepared.

We should be ready and able to welcome the Christ, whenever he comes, and however he comes, in to the midst of our selves individually, into our community, and into our world. We are the advance men, so to speak. Our job is to get the place ready for the main act. Are we ready? Are you ready? Am I ready? Well, confession time. I'm not. Just when Advent calls me to turn inward, to let my spirit expand and welcome again the Christ child into my heart, and to be a conduit for Christ to the world, the outside world yanks me into a frenzy of grading, present buying for a large extended family, and planning for the Christmas holiday. I feel more like a harried party planner than a priest! And I'm sure many of you face the same dilemma. How do we honor the season of Advent, prepare for the coming again of the Christ child into our hearts, and cultivate the kingdom of God among us, without allowing the secular season out there to turn us either into Scrooge or the Energizer Bunny?

In the spirit of all of those women's magazines that offer twenty ways to beat holiday stress, I am offering Sidnie's three tips for observing a blessed Advent. That's right, just three.

Number one. Put first things first. Set aside time everyday for prayer and meditation. Nurture that divine flame, the Holy Spirit within you. Open your spirit so that Christ may enter. Come to church. But don't worry if your spiritual preparations are not perfect. Jesus is not like great-aunt Harriet, inspecting your soul for dust bunnies in the corners. Jesus is more like the Merry Maids. He comes in, and the next thing you know, your soul is all spruced up and decorated. Wouldn't that be great?

Number two. Reach out to others, however you can. Jesus invites everyone to the celebration; we should do the same. Generosity spreads the love we have in Christ to the rest of the world, cultivating a little bit more of God's kingdom every time we do something for someone else. So go ahead, throw that Kruegeraand into the Salvation Army kettle!

Number three. Be mindful of why you do what you do this season. As you prepare your celebrations, really think about the people involved, how much you love them, and how much you will enjoy each other. Some of you have heard me moan and groan about my nine grandchildren, a niece and a nephew, and two godchildren, all of whom must be remembered in some way this time of year. But would I trade any part of that big, wonderful family that Dan and I share? Not on your life. I am very blessed, and I know it. So we all need to be mindful of the love that surrounds us, that we feel for one another, that pours down on us from God. Be thankful for all that you have, but especially for the love you give and receive, from others and from God.

That's it. Simple, easy, three steps: Love God, love your neighbor, and give thanks. If you follow Sidnie's simple steps to a stress-free Advent, you will wake from spiritual sleep. You will be awake to the presence of Christ in the world, to the kingdom of God that is among us. And you will be prepared to welcome Christ as he comes again, whenever and however he comes. I wish you a blessed Advent.