

First Sunday of Advent

ARE YOU AWAKE?

“ARE YOU AWAKE?” Perhaps the director asks this of the choir when a rehearsal seems to drag and the energy is low.

Sleeping and waking are part of the natural rhythm of life. But sleep is mysterious, isn't it? Studies show that in the last century the average American is sleeping two hours less per night—from an average of nine hours in 1910 to about 6.9 hours now.

“I'm so tired.” How often do you hear that? We've become a tired and chronically sleep-deprived generation. Some of us also toss and turn. We wake up early. Is it stress? Is it getting older? Is it our diet or the wine we drank the night before? Is it the mattress? It's hard to be fully awake during the day when we haven't had a good night of sleep.

The days are getting shorter. There is less light and more darkness. And for many, these days come with an added burden. Seasonal Affective Disorder—or SAD—challenges some people at this time of year. There may be depression, oversleeping, lethargy, and a feeling of fatigue.

Another Advent arrives with a wake-up call. Are you awake? Or are you sleepwalking through life? The first Sunday of Advent is like an alarm clock. The jarring images catch our attention. It's like a jolt of caffeine, or the shock of cold water being poured on us. Another year has passed. Time is flying. Life is short. Are you awake?

The early Christians believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime. Many scriptures were written with that perspective in mind. The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. So keep awake. Be mindful. Be watchful. Be vigilant. Be ready. Christ is coming soon and that might mean right now. Christ comes among us in word and sacrament, in the gift of community, in the face of a stranger, in the priceless gifts in each moment.

Don't forget to get a good night of sleep. You'll be more alert at rehearsal and for the service! Yet, the Advent alarm clock is also ringing. Christ is coming. Christ is here! Are you awake?

A Latin Advent hymn gives words for our prayer:

Wakened by the solemn warning,
 from earth's bondage let us rise;
 Christ, our sun, all sloth dispelling,
 shines upon the morning skies.

READINGS AND PSALM

Isaiah 2:1-5

War transformed into peace

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD." (Ps. 122:1)

Romans 13:11-14

Salvation is near; wake from sleep

Matthew 24:36-44

The sudden coming of salvation

REHEARSAL NOTES

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Fourth Sunday in Lent

OUT OF SIGHT

AS MUSICIANS, we know that some people can “sight read” a musical piece more easily than others. Yet each person brings different gifts to a choir in the same way we each bring diverse gifts to a faith community.

This Sunday’s gospel is about a man born blind who is given sight, and about some who can see but are blind. If you look more closely, you’ll see that there’s more than what meets the eye.

Why was this man born blind? Why is there suffering, illness, and disease in the world? The common wisdom of the day said it was because someone had sinned—either the man or his parents. If something bad happens, surely I deserved it or brought it upon myself.

Jesus rejects this way of seeing things. Maybe some good can come from our blindness, our disabilities, and our vulnerabilities. When we are most “out of sight,” so to speak, the eyes of our hearts are most open to light and healing. As Helen Keller said: “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched, they must be felt in the heart.”

We are blind when we believe that we alone hold the truth, or when we are unable to see someone else’s point of view. We are blind when our convictions about life, love, politics, or the world are so rigid that what people see in us is arrogance, pride, and hypocrisy. We are blind when we close our eyes to the suffering and injustice in the world.

Jesus anoints the man’s eyes and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam, and he regains his sight. You can see how this became a story about baptism. The early church called baptism “enlightenment” and “illumination”. Like the blind man, when we wash in the healing and cleansing waters of baptism, our eyes are opened and we learn to see in new ways.

Jesus is the source of our vision, the light of the world. And we are children of God, beautiful in God’s eyes. May that good news shine in our hearts and our eyes as we sing!

Using a hymn stanza by John Marriott, we pray:

Christ, who once came to bring,
 on your redeeming wing,
 healing and sight;
 health to the troubled mind,
 sight where illusions blind;
 oh, now to humankind
 let there be light.

READINGS AND PSALM

1 Samuel 16:1-13

David is chosen and anointed

Psalm 23

You anoint my head with oil. (Ps. 23:5)

Ephesians 5:8-14

Live as children of light

John 9:1-41

The man born blind

REHEARSAL NOTES

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Fourth Sunday of Easter

ACCESS GRANTED

ACCESS DENIED. These are frustrating words when you're trying to get into a Web site or maneuver in the mysterious world of the Web. *Access denied.* Many governments around the world serve as Internet gatekeepers, blocking or filtering content. Access is denied if material about politics, sexuality, or religion is seen as too sensitive for ordinary citizens.

At its worst, religion is seen as a gatekeeper: declaring who's in and who's out, defining who gets access to God, to communion, or to the hereafter. We've all heard the Pearly Gates vignettes in which St. Peter decides whether to grant someone access to heaven.

In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus says that he is the gate for the sheep. As gates go, Jesus is rather unconventional. If he keeps anyone out, it's those that everyone thought were in: the religious ones who think they are righteous and have all the answers. And if he keeps anyone in, it's those who thought they could never get in the gate: sinners and other outsiders.

When Jesus talks about being a gate he mentions thieves and bandits who come to destroy. What are the things in our world and in our lives that block access to the abundant life that God desires for us?

In the Internet world we call them hackers. The "gate" either permits or denies access to some resource located on the inside. The "gateway" is an excluding function that keeps out those with improper motivation or unauthorized access.

It is certainly within our nature to first name the thieves and bandits who do evil in the world. But can we also name the inner hackers and thieves who prevent us from living with integrity and who mess with our spiritual priorities?

Access granted. That is the good news. *The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need.* Christ comes to grant abundant life. He leads us to pastures where we feed on that which truly nourishes our souls. He gathers us around the still waters of our baptism, and nourishes at his table with broken bread and overflowing cup.

May our words and music tell the good news: In Christ, access granted.

We pray in the words of this well-known hymn:

We are yours; in love befriend us, be the guardian of our way;
 keep your flock, from sin defend us, seek us when we go astray.
 Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, hear us children when we pray.
 Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, hear us children when we pray.

READINGS AND PSALM

Acts 2:42-47

The believers' common life

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. (Ps. 23:1)

1 Peter 2:19-25

Follow the shepherd, even in suffering

John 10:1-10

Christ the shepherd

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