

Sermon For Sunday, November 27, 2016 - "Wake Up!"

First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Wake Up!

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Advent is a wake up call. It sounds an alarm: things are not as God intends and Jesus is coming to make things right. This wake up call always feels a little harsh especially so close to Christmas. We often think of Advent as a warm, cozy time in which we prepare for the birth of a baby; instead we're hearing about Jesus coming like a thief in the night. We get this intense Gospel reading that seems to be trying to scare us into staying awake and alert and on guard. This alarm feels so out of step with all the cozy images of the Christmas season.

Yet Advent is a 'both/and' season. It is both about preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus and preparing for Jesus to return. The word Advent means 'coming'. Advent is the season when we look to Jesus coming as a baby and look to when Jesus will come again, at the end of time, to make all things right. In the same way, the wake up call that Advent offers is also 'both/and'. It is both startling and inviting. It is the sharp sound of steel being beaten by a hammer, a very harsh sound, until you remember it is also the sound of swords being beaten into plowshares. The Advent wake up call is like both a shrill alarm clock on a Monday morning and the sun shining in your window waking you up to the start of a wonderful vacation.

Advent scriptures and hymns can sound a strident alarm. All is not well with the world, not at all. Wake up, get to work, prepare for Jesus to come and make things right. The author of the Gospel of Matthew, especially, uses stark metaphors to give us a sense of urgency about Jesus' coming. He says we will be startled and shaken out of our comfort zones. Patterns, routines, and relationships will be unsettled and even uprooted. We will need to wake up to all the ways our apathy and overindulgence have lulled us to sleep and haven't been preparing us for God's kingdom to come among us. Advent scriptures and hymns also lovingly invite us to awaken to the good news that Jesus is coming again. A new day is dawning, we're told. This will be a great and glorious day in which swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Advent scriptures and hymns seek to awaken us to the promise of this new day. We're called to look forward to God's coming day and live in it's light even when we can't yet feel fully the warmth of it on our faces. We're asked to live with hope and eager expectation of the time when Jesus will come again to make all things right.

This 'both/and' nature of Advent is helpful in these days as our country has had so many harsh wake up calls. We've had so many unsettling moments in which our cozy, comfortable, middle class lives have been disrupted by painful realities in our country. We've been asked to reckon with all the ways we've lived as if black lives don't matter, all the ways our housing laws, zoning codes, tax structure, educational funding, and judicial system have institutionalized and perpetuated racism. We've been asked to acknowledge our own biases and white privilege, to recognize that though we are not to blame for the things that happened in the

past. We have a responsibility to address them as Christians who are part of God's work of making all things right.

We've also heard voices spewing racism, sexism, homophobia, and Islamophobia grow louder and more strident. These voices have been emboldened by campaign rhetoric and political appointments. Christians must wake up to the increasing fear and hatred of others. We must speak out against words and actions that exclude, blame, demean or vilify any group of people. This is not about partisan politics, this is about a Christian witness to God's love and concern for all people. We are to stand against fear and hatred and live out God's care for everyone, especially those who are marginalized. We need to do this in at home, in our families, at work, in our communities, online. We have also been awakened to the intense anger and fear of many who face economic uncertainty in an age of globalization, automation and increasing health care costs, and to the frustration and suspicion many of these people have of government and of politics as usual.

Scripture shows us that God cares about our common life - the way we live together - and God cares about the well-being of all people. As Christians we are called to join God in working toward a just and equitable society that benefits all people. These harsh wake up calls can be helpful if they lead us to join God in working to make all things right. Yet if all we have are strident calls to action, it can get a bit overwhelming. We can feel like it is all too much, and leads us to want to just hide out, warm and cozy inside our privileged lives.

We also need the sunlight of God's coming new day to shine into our windows and make us want to get up and get going. We need signs and visions of this new day God is bringing - glorious visions that can make us arise and greet each day with hope and expectation. So, we are given promises throughout Advent: promises like we heard in Romans - the night is far gone, the day is near; promises like we heard in Isaiah - nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. And the next few weeks of promises from Isaiah just keep getting better and better - we hear about the wolf lying down with the lamb and a desert blossoming.

Jesus is coming again and the new day he is bringing is already on the horizon. It may take a long time, but God has promised and God keeps promises. God kept the promise to send Jesus, the Messiah, as a baby and God will keep these promises as well. These promises and visions help us to see that we aren't just called to get out of bed and address problems. We're also called to wake up, notice and be alert to everything that God is doing to bring in this new day. Everywhere we look, there are signs of God's coming kingdom. There are people reaching out across divides to work together, communities showing love and care, nations seeking to bring an end to warfare.

In Advent, God gives us both harsh and inviting wake up calls. These help us to live with hope and expectation and anticipation, and help us to join God in working for the day when all will be made new. In Advent, we also look to Jesus coming to us in yet another way - the same way he comes to us each Sunday in bread and wine, word and gathered community. Jesus comes among us to call us to action to bring a taste of God's coming kingdom among us.

Thanks be to God. Now let's take a few minutes to pray for God to wake us up so that we might work, so that we might hope.

Amen.