

Staying Awake

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Anyone that knows my husband Adam might well suspect that he has some sort of sleep disorder. At almost any time of the day, he can fall into an instant quiet snore. I'll be sitting next to him at any number of events and suddenly he gets quiet, his head goes down to his chin, and his body rises and falls noiselessly in the sweet gentle rhythms of quiet sleep.

Finally a couple of weeks ago Adam went to one of those new sleep centers for some testing. What a hoot! Once there they slathered his head and a few other places with big dabs of something akin to crazy glue, attached thirteen wires to his head, chest and leg which were somehow hooked into convenient little box thingy they hung around his neck, put tight bands around his chest and stomach, oxygen up his nose, and then put him in a little barren cubical and then invited him to sleep. Can you imagine?

Here is the amazing part. When Adam got home the next morning, I eagerly asked him. How did it go? Did you get any sleep at all? His answer? *I slept like a baby!*

Jesus' repeated exhortation in the second part of today's Gospel lesson is to "Stay awake!" Staying awake and sleeping are favorite words used by spiritual teachers for our spiritual condition. We think we are awake, but for the most part are so spiritually distracted or anesthetized we miss the glory of what God is up to in the world.

It is Jesus' observation, in fact, that many of us spend our entire lives spiritually sleep walking and not seeing. Take for example his disciples. These are the same ones who barely manage to keep their eyes pried open during moments of great exaltation like the Transfiguration or greatest need, such as in the Garden of Gethsemane. But Jesus has hope in us. He commands us in no uncertain terms "Stay awake!" But what does he want us to stay awake for? What does he want us to see? And how can we see if there is so much darkness around us?

I think few would disagree that we live in dark times. Jesus' vision of the sun becoming dark, the moon losing its light and the stars falling from the heavens symbolizes well how many experience the condition of our world even now. Life is falling apart, and the firmness of the ground underneath doesn't feel firm at all. Just ask those whose world is dark. They are all around, if not we ourselves. How can light prevail over darkness when there is so much of it? And how can we keep awake when the news and the perspectives of "this is just how things are" and "What else would you expect?" fill the air?

For centuries the points of light in the darkness for Christians have been the saints. Some of my favorites include Augustine, Athanasius, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King. As a child I was brought up with the unusual ideal that nothing was more exciting or important than being a saint. Part of the wonder of their lives is that they were by no means perfect. They were only beloved children of God (*like you and me!*) whose light in their own times reflected the light of God's vibrancy, showing a more human, more just, more joyous way to live. Our first hymn this morning speaks to their place in history. Lo! He comes, with clouds descending, once for our salvation slain; thousand thousand saints attending swell the triumph of his train (Hymn 57).

Beauty is another kind of light in the darkness that helps us stay awake. It may not be the beauty of what we see but rather of what we hear. Recently we have been hearing the beauty of our newly restored bells. Each hour they remind us of hymns reaching back over the centuries that have sustained us as a people. They ring out almost whimsically each hour over streets of a city that has little notion of the hope we are proclaiming. Inside on Sabbaths such as today we listen and participate in chants and psalms and hymns that reach as far back into the urge to praise God as they reach high to please and mimic the angels in the heavens. Music like this alerts us to the beauty of sound throughout God's creation, the sound of water gurgling over the stones of a brook or birds chirping in the trees and among the grasses. Once again, light comes through the darkness, and we are stirred awake.

Returning to beauty beheld with our eyes, I recently saw the new exhibition of Islamic art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. What a joy to behold the blending of the religious imagination with exquisite craftsmanship, beauty, and design! How blessed we are to be in an age and in a country where we can name God's presence and light as being with peoples of many faiths, God having so many clear paths to woo the human heart. Even as I worship Jesus as the one to come at the end of history, I give thanks for the light of God I find in them as well. In fact, *because* of Jesus I know the joy of loving all people, regardless of their class, tribe, or religion. Jesus specifically came to die for us all.

Where else shall we name as light that can help us watch and keep awake?

Last week there was a gathering of the Outreach Committee and the Interfaith Assembly for Homeless and Housing for a big Thanksgiving celebration. Tuttle Hall was packed with over 75 people who had at one time been homeless and given up hope that anyone would reach out a helping hand. That night they gathered not only to share a meal, but to launch a new part of their mission: that the formerly homeless and their mentors would use their strengths and victories to help those still on the street today. Such joy was there that night! God's name was praised. Jesus was reigning high as the king of peace and Lord of Lords.

There is even beauty and light in the anger of prophets, both yesterday and today. In our first reading Isaiah does not hesitate to blast those who stand in the way of God's in breaking kingdom. "Oh that today you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence ... we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth (Isa 64: 1,6).

In a recent interview with the participants of Occupy Wall Street, some leaders have recently set out to articulate some vision and goals for their fledgling moment. There specific demands and concerns are starting to gel ("Don't Sit This One Out –What's Your vision for Occupy Wall Street", Michael Moore, Nov. 22, 2011, New York Times). Many people have been asking after this past week, is it the beginning or the end of the movement? For myself, I hope it is the beginning. *There is so much darkness in our country of late.* It brings to mind a comment that I recently heard, that our country has changed over the past years from one that wanted to be good to one that wants to *feel* good. I think our modern day prophets are finally objecting, finally naming that *we can do better!* But Jesus, the Prince of Peace, has even more in mind. On the way to meet us from the end of history the unimaginable happens: When he finally comes there will be no more war, no more prisons, no more hunger or thirst or even tears of sadness. How's that for articulated goals of a movement? Can our present day dreams be conformed to the age to come? Thanks be to Jesus, that is all of our work as we struggle to keep awake.

There is light to be seen in our present darkness, and Jesus does not want us to miss it. This is why we begin the church year with his command to stay awake! We need to be reminded that our call as disciples is to keep our eyes peeled for what is afoot from God's point of view. This is what the Gospels are all about: people with eyes to see, ears to hear; the lame dancing; the dead rising to life.

It turns out that my dear Adam falls asleep a lot during the day because he is sleep deprived at night. Thanks to modern day technology and a clever sleeping device, he will be fine. That may not be true for much of humanity. We are so busy and distracted with many things that we are too worn out to stay awake and see the light of God's kingdom breaking through the darkness. But then again, that is why we are gathered together this first Sunday of Advent.

As such, God's kingdom does not break in upon us with blaring loudspeakers and blinding search lights so that we can't sleep through it. It gleams and glimmers in unexpected places. God will not overpower us with brilliance. A glow is enough if we are on the watch for it. God wants us to use our own God-given eyes, both physical and spiritual eyes, to see discern the light of his presence already breaking in.

Come Lord Jesus. Come soon.