

Awake and aware

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2008.

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

Mark 13:37

We begin this Advent season with a sense of anticipation and readiness for Christ's coming to us. His first coming in history was at his birth in Bethlehem of Judea. The ancient Hebrew people had long awaited a savior who would restore Israel to their former glory. He comes again each time we celebrate the Eucharist as he asked us to do. Some may take Jesus' prophecy of his final coming in judgment literally while others see it as a foretelling of when each of us reaches the end of our mortal lives.

How different a world we would have if it were not for the influence of the Christian faith in every part of the world! Our calling as Christians is to know Christ and make him known in each generation. We believe in the possibilities that wrongs can be made right, evil will be overcome and justice will prevail.

Jesus foretells his return in his story of the doorkeeper who is warned about the return of the master of the household at any time, day or night. The doorkeeper's job is to remain on watch and in readiness for the time of his master's return. If we are to be ready to receive Christ into our lives, we will need to recognize him in whatever form he appears. We must also keep awake, alert, and ready to receive him. Living in a state of preparedness means being ready at times when we least expect it.

Will he recognize us as faithful followers or will we be strangers to each other? He stands at the doorway of our lives as we wait to receive him when he appears. In the dynamics of the life of any group, there are those who occupy the powerful position as gatekeepers. They are the ones who determine who will enter the group and who will participate and who will have influence on the group's life together. We are gatekeepers who need to remain alert to those who seek new meaning in their lives.

One of the strengths of this parish is a genuine atmosphere of welcoming and friendliness. When I visit churches, one of the things I look for is a warm and welcoming atmosphere. More often than not, people are too reserved and self-absorbed to speak to someone they don't know. I usually have to take the initiative to introduce myself. When I call a business or professional office and identify myself, I often encounter a disinterested voice who usually asks me to repeat everything I just said. The receptionist in any office as the gatekeeper gives the first impression of the organization. Courtesy never killed anyone, but disinterestedness and rudeness can mean the demise of any organization or business, especially a church congregation.

Advent is a time of anticipation and expectation, a time to live our lives in anticipation and readiness. It means putting everything into perspective and getting in touch with what is really important and of lasting value. We all face judgment every day of our lives and the best way to be ready is to have Christ as both our example and our advocate.

This Advent season is about being aware of how God intervenes in our lives as we search for meaning and greater spiritual depth. Many people tell me that they are embarrassed that they know so little of the Bible while at the same time they are reluctant to take advantage

of opportunities to study the scriptures. Self-consciousness creates a barrier to spiritual growth. Don't wait until you are confronted with your own mortality to find out what the scriptures are saying in the context of your own life. Once you learn to study the Bible for what it has to say to you, the barriers to understanding are broken down.

As we enter upon this exciting but too often frantic season of Christmas shopping, we are reminded of the need to reorder our priorities as we anticipate how God comes to us again and again in the person of Christ. Christmas is all about how God comes to us in the person of Jesus. His sovereignty is over all earthly powers, dominions, principalities and regimes, ancient or modern, dictatorial or free.

Let this Advent be a season in itself and resist rushing Christmas. Take time to prepare and experience the real joy of how God is incarnated into human history. Difficult as it is for many of us to be patient; those who wait in anticipation are rewarded with the glorious fact that God entered the human condition to redeem us, giving us value and worth.

Advent is a time of hope and expectation. In the midst of the violence and crime and the ongoing paranoia over terrorism in the world, we are sustained in the confidence that God's love overcomes all manner of evil, personally, socially, economically, and politically. Use this Advent time to awaken a true sense of honesty and integrity from within. If we are completely honest with ourselves, there is no need to rationalize or seek excuses. We may try to fool others, we can even try to fool ourselves, but we can never fool God

Use this time to make the effort to be more understanding of others and realize that those who may annoy us may have factors in their lives we neither know nor understand. They deserve the same respect we want for ourselves. This world will be made whole when we bring our broken and unfulfilled selves before God in complete openness and honesty to find wholeness and fulfillment.

Awaken to the real meaning of Advent by learning from the lessons of the past as we head into the future. Now is the only time we can do anything about what matters. Now is our only opportunity to make a difference. I don't believe in fatalism, everything hasn't been predetermined. Fate has a hopeless end while faith has endless hope. Christ comes not in weakness, but in power; not to destroy, but to fulfill.

Thanks be to God for the victories, large and small that are won for us.