

It's wonderful to walk into church this morning and see the halls and sanctuary decked out, getting ready for Christmas. I was actually surprised to see it this morning, and so I'm so thankful for those that did it. Today, however, is the first Sunday of Advent, which is more than the season leading up to Christmas. The lectionary readings will remind us of this over the next few weeks.

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin word for "coming." Advent is a season about Christ's coming. And every Advent, it's good to think of at least three ways that Christ comes to us.

- First, Christ comes as a baby-- God is incarnated Jesus of Nazareth, a human being. This is the coming that we're generally used to thinking about during Advent.
- Secondly, Christ comes into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. In the words of John 1:12, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." When we receive Christ and believe in him, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and convinces us that we are children of God.
- Thirdly, Jesus will come again. In the words of the Apostles Creed, "He will come again to judge the living and the dead." This second coming of Jesus is what the scripture teaches and it's what the church has taught since the beginning. Jesus will return.

*The* central point of the Advent season is this: Get ready!

And this is the point of the reading from Matthew today. It's a new church year today, so we leave the Gospel of Luke and begin to use the Gospel of Matthew until this time next year.

Jesus says, in Matthew's Gospel, that only the Father knows when the Son will come again. Jesus chooses to limit his knowledge so that, as the reflection

in the bulletin says, “every generation might live in the expectation of Christ’s return.”

Jesus gives warnings about that time. He says it’ll be like the days of Noah, when everyone was going on their merry way, and then the flood came and took them away. In the same way, he says, two will be in the field, one will be taken away, but one will be left. Two will be working, and one will be taken, but one will be left.

The point of these passages is not to scare us. Rather, the key point is in verse 42: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

Keep Awake. Keep Watch. Don’t fall asleep. Remain vigilant.

It’s not for us to know when Jesus will come back. The point is that we’ll want to be ready when he does. We want to be like children greeting their parent who’s just gotten home by saying, “I’m glad you’re here. Let me show you what we’ve been doing!” not by hiding the mess we’ve made.

What will I have been doing when Jesus returns? What will we as a church have been doing when Jesus returns?

Speaking to his closest disciples, Jesus says, “Keep awake.” He believes them to be awake already, and they just need to stay awake. The currently reality of the Christian church, however, is that we’re not spiritual awake-- at least not all the time. And so before we can *stay* awake, we need to wake up.

John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist movement, ended up providing leadership over a *great* awakening that happened in Great Britain and Ireland in the 1700s. Last week I shared a bit about him. His experience

of awakening is helpful for us to consider as we try to figure out what it looks like for Christians (first) to wake up and (secondly) to keep awake.

(I remember hearing stories about John Wesley growing up as a Methodist and thinking to myself, “why not just talk about Jesus?” It was a fair question. So my answer to childhood me is that he is simply a remarkable example of how someone can live out the way of Jesus faithfully over a long period of time. And since most people here consider themselves Methodists, it’s helpful to know where we come from.)

Last week I shared how John had been in a storm at sea, and he thought he might die. He realized that he wasn’t as *ready* as he thought he was should he end up facing the Lord sooner rather than later. Having largely failed as a missionary to the American Indians in Georgia, Wesley boarded a ship home to England disgraced, defeated, and at a spiritual low. He wrote in his journal, “I went to America, to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me? Who... will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief?” He said, “I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.” He speaks strong words about himself that he would later temper, but his pursuit was earnest and urgent.

Back in England, he met a Moravian named Peter Bohler. Not even a month after meeting him, Wesley said that *through him*, he became “clearly convinced of [his own] unbelief.”<sup>1</sup> There was a gap between the faith of scripture and whatever faith that he possessed. For the next several months, Wesley lived aware that he was spiritually asleep, but unable to wake himself up. He was done with vicarious spirituality that just went through the motions on the exterior. He wanted the real thing for himself-- he wanted Christ *in* him.

---

<sup>1</sup>John Wesley, *The Heart of John Wesley’s Journal*, ed. Percy Livingstone Parker (New York; Chicago; Toronto; London; Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1903), 35.

He wrote in his journal for May 24, 1738:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt *my heart* strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given *me* that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

This was undoubtedly a turning point for Wesley, where **he began to wake up**. Wesley had received assurance of his salvation. Yet he was still troubled by the gap that remained between his faith and the faith of the New Testament. He wrote to a friend, saying, "I am still dead and cold; having peace indeed, but no love or joy in the Holy Ghost."

Seven months later, though, John and many of his co-workers were gathered at the Fetter Lane Society, a small Moravian church in London. George Whitefield, who would go on to be the most famous preacher of his generation, was there as well. It was New Years Eve. A group of about 60 spent the whole night in prayer. This is what John wrote about the time of prayer in his journal the next day:

About three in the morning, as we were [persisting] in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, [to such an extent] that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, "We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord."

If Aldersgate was like a gentle kiss on sleepy Wesley's forehead, that night at Fetter lane was like a bucket of ice water poured over him. And boy did he wake up. That night launched a revival in England. Whitefield was soon engaging in open air preaching to 10,000 people in rural areas and 50,000 in London. Wesley had initially been opposed to the practice of preaching outside the church, but on April 2 of that year, he, in his words, "submitted to be more vile," speaking to a crowd of about 3,000 outdoors.

People were waking up, left and right when George Whitefield and John Wesley were preaching, but it's the Holy Spirit who wakes people up.

Still, Wesley understood that people, once awakened, need to stay awake. The way that he accomplished that was to join people together in small groups called classes. It was in those groups that they would maintain the Christian practices of doing no harm, doing good, and maintaining a connection to Christ through the sacraments and other spiritual disciplines. In class meetings, Methodists would hold each other accountable to living out the Christian life. Membership in a class meeting was what made you a Methodist. If you weren't in a class meeting, you weren't a Methodist.

It was nearly universally recognized that Whitefield was a better preacher than Wesley. By some accounts, Whitefield preached to 10 million people over his ministry. But Wesley's people persevered in the faith. Here is Whitefield's own explanation of what happened. He said,

My Brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class[es], and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand

Waking up is important. It's essential, actually. And if Wesley's story shows us anything, it's that many more people are asleep in the faith than realize it.

But when the Holy Spirit wakes us up, we need to keep awake. We do that by staying connected to Christ and to one another.

There are lots of ways to do that, but the sacrament of Holy Communion is one of the most vivid and most reliable. When we come together around the communion table, it's like coming together for a Great "Thanksgiving meal". We're gathered as a family, reconciled with one another and with God. And we come to receive the grace that we need to stay awake and ready until Christ comes to us or we go to him. So let's come, expectant that Christ will wake us up more and keep us awake, so that we will be ready when he comes.