

A Holy and Blessed Advent to each and every one of you.....Keep awake, make ourselves ready, hang-on....these are the themes we hear today in our Scriptural lessons on this first Sunday of Advent, this first Sunday of a new church calendar year. We are wearing different color vestments, have different liturgical hangings, we have an Advent wreath dangling over our heads, with its first candle lit. Starting a new church year also means that we switch Gospels: from Matthew to Mark....And we have Mark in all its resplendent frightfulness this Sunday morning, with overtones of judgment and warnings.... With *hints* of better days ahead.....and the clear and intentional statement: *Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.* Quite the way to begin Advent.

Advent always seems to be a season in conflict with the rest of the world. The world is telling us to start celebrating Christmas, right now. While in church-land we are supposed to enter into this period of waiting, of watching, of praying, of expectancy, of exploration. There is a strong juxtaposition between what we see and hear in the world around us, and what we see and hear in church-land. How do we reconcile the two?

This reflective waiting period that is Advent can be a gift. This Advent time can be a period in which we give our spiritual selves a joyful present: we can provide for ourselves a quiet place to spiritually incubate, kind of like what happens in a petri-dish we used in high school chemistry class. Or perhaps, apropos for the season, Advent's gift to us is like a pregnancy, where we are waiting with great expectation, waiting in the unknown, waiting in excitement. This spiritual incubation period is really a transition time. That is what we are doing in Advent: we are waiting on a transition moment to happen....the Incarnation. The Incarnation being God taking human form....the transcendent God becoming the imminent God. We are waiting on a joyful mystery to unfold: God taking human form, becoming tangible and real and yet, still a mystery. Waiting can be a good thing, an appropriate time to dwell into the mystery of that Christmas morning to come 28 days hence....and what that in-breaking of God *means* to us. We need this time of reflection to try and understand this in-breaking of God and its personal impact on each of our individual lives.

Initially, our reading from Mark today may not seem to fit this period of reflection to which we are called in Advent. In this chapter, Mark uses imagery and language steeped in Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scripture. Images from Baruch and Micah, Zechariah and Daniel, Joel, Isaiah and Deuteronomy pervade this chapter. The imagery presented makes this chapter hard to decipher and a bit scary. Yet our passage for today ends with a clear statement from Jesus telling us to "keep awake." These two words we hear today at the end of our Gospel selection, "keep awake," are actually the last words Jesus speaks before we enter the Passion narrative in Mark....Why do we have a Holy Week reading here at the beginning of Advent? Jesus is getting ready to willingly walk into a *vulnerable* time, where he is *authentically* himself. By having *this* reading at the start of Advent, we are being asked to examine ourselves, our actions, our conscience and make ourselves vulnerable to truth. Advent is a time for us to have a naked, vulnerable authenticity in our relationship with God.

Given what is happening in our world's economic climate, being unaware of our financial vulnerability is nearly impossible. So many people's lives have radically changed in the last few years because of the crumbling of our financial system. So many people are struggling just to hang-on. This kind of pressure makes us vulnerable, vulnerable to truth, naked to the constructs we have made around us, many of which are just that, constructs and not support mechanisms. Almost everyone who is caught in this struggle, and even many of us who are not, are evaluating what is important, what is vital in our lives for us to be able to hang-on.

This idea of just "hanging-on" brings to mind one of my favorite movies: *Ordinary People*. It is a story about a family's dysfunction after the death of one of two sons in a boating accident. These two brothers were out on Lake Michigan when a storm blew in, capsizing their boat. The older brother, the stronger of the two, the more popular of the two, the star athlete, doesn't make it, while the younger, weaker, less popular one does. The movie starts after the surviving brother tries to commit suicide, and the movie explores the hell that is the family's attempts at working through their loss. The penultimate scene in the movie involves the break-through moment where, in his psychiatrist's office, this younger brother admits to what he believes his error was on the capsized boat, about which he has been feeling guilty. He admits that he is angry at his brother for not hanging on, and the protagonist feels guilty that *he* was able to hang-on. The weaker was able to do what the stronger could not: he hung on. In that moment of vulnerable clarity, he understood who he authentically was. *That* is an Advent moment.

As we journey through this Advent season together, living into the Christmas cheer that surrounds and tempts us, we can do something different than succumb to that, sometimes, false cheer: we can witness to a profound change. That profound change being the coming of God into the world. To assist our witnessing to this change, there are a number of spiritual exercises that can deepen our spiritual experience during this holy season of Advent. These spiritual practices can help us battle the Holiday madness, and perhaps Holiday depression, that can sometimes overwhelm us. One of those spiritual disciplines is praying every day, and making a joyful wondering about this mystery of the Incarnation as the center of those prayerful wonderings. These prayers are a method of centering ourselves in a way that truly marks this season. We can joyfully ponder this mystery of God coming to dwell among us, becoming more intimately linked to us, and that is something onto which *we can* hang-on. That wondering can make us look at our lives, our interests and help us evaluate what is important in our lives, what we want from our lives.

Part of hanging on is being able to become deeply and intimately aware of our vulnerability: to God and to each other. By taking a step into this naked vulnerability, vulnerable like a child in a manger, we get to shed from ourselves that which is not truly important and focus on what is vital in our lives. We get to become our true and authentic selves. Being this open, this vulnerable, allows us to be open to God in our lives, allows us to be open to the moving of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Being vulnerable can be frightening, but it also provides us with an opportunity to more readily immerse ourselves in the knowledge that God is present in all that we truly are....Who is our authentic self? When we are authentic to others, our bond with them grows stronger, and our ability to see and understand God's love for us grows more palpable.

Every year we are asked to think on this mystery of the Incarnation....Being able to joyfully ponder the juxtaposition of this great mystery of God taking human form to walk and be with us,

and our living into who we authentically are, is a gift *available* to all of us this season and is a spiritual gift we can give ourselves this Advent.

Part of that spiritual gift to ourselves is our ability to explore how God is engaged at the center of our authentic self, of who we are and what we do. We are gifted the opportunity in the next few weeks to not get sucked into the pre-holiday cheer that surrounds us, but instead immerse ourselves in being naked, vulnerable and authentic....with ourselves, with each other, and finding God right smack dab in the middle of all of that wonderful, beautiful mess that each of us are. That is something onto which all of us can hang on. At our weakest, at our most vulnerable, we can and we do find surprising strength from that deeply rooted and central knowledge that God is with us, that God's love for us is so great that there is a babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes waiting at the end of this pregnant period we enter today, whose presence here changed heaven and earth....We are asked to keep awake thinking about the Incarnation, to be ready for surprises, to hang on to our vulnerability....because we are preparing for the opening of the kingdom come among us.

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