

## **Sermon Advent Sunday Year B 2020**

For the first time in eight months I have ascended the steps of this pulpit. For the first time in eight months I can now speak to this church gathered as one, as you take your rightful place in the ship of faith. For the first time in eight months, the cameras are off, and I can speak to you directly, in person, and not through some screen or device. I ascend the steps of this pulpit and speak to you now with profound – profound gratitude, joy! - to see you! I am here today with gratitude to God! Gratitude that God has granted us the grace to return, that he has heard our prayers, that we have been spared the worst of what this time could have brought upon us. And gratitude that you have persevered, that you have remained faithful, that you are here today.

It is some effort to hold back the emotion. Because this is for us a great homecoming, a family reunion. We have been kept apart. Because whatever faltering efforts we've employed to keep us together and connected and the whole show going, we know – maybe profoundly, deeply and even painfully – that these past months we lost something. We were deprived of something. Whatever efforts and optimism we called upon during this time, we know that as the living body of Christ our core identity was strained. We are members of that body. We are a church. We belong together. And this time of isolation and separation that our full life as church was simply not possible.

So, even as we gather today with gratitude (and even a degree of cautious optimism!) the words of the Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent, should unsettle us still and keep us at least a little on edge. Yes, we need time for healing, time for reconnection, time for rebuilding. Yes, we need to be gentle with ourselves and each other. We have been through a lot, personally and collectively. So, we shouldn't be too anxious about what we 'should' be doing, anxious to 'catch up' on what we've missed, anxious to do all those things that haven't been able to happen this year. There will be time for all that. All those things will be addressed. But the work of the gospel is hardly commended by approaching with a spirit of anxiety.

And yet, and yet... the urgency of the gospel remains: watch! Or in some translations, stay awake! The little gospel today, just four verses long and yet three times our Lord says, watch/stay awake! How right it is that we can meet in this way on this first Sunday in Advent. This is our new year! The whole cycle of our remembrance of the mystery of salvation - from Christ's birth to his death and resurrection – begins today.

How right it is that we meet today on this our New Year so we can, if you like, leave behind the previous year with its burdens and anxieties, losses, sorrows and fears. Yes, they have been part of our story. Yes, the ripples and repercussions of this time will be felt for some time yet. And we need to have listened to, to have taken note of it, to learn something from it. But we do not have to drag all of the issues and burdens of it with us into the year ahead. We can look ahead and see a new beginning. And as we look ahead, and step ahead, we should take the urgency of *the gospel* with us: watch! Stay awake!

It would be a grave error to step ahead into this new year of opportunity and promise with a 'business as usual' kind of approach. It would be a grave error to imagine the experience of the past year has been nothing more than an inconvenient blip on the landscape of our lives. It would be a grave error to imagine that God was absent from this experience, that there was nothing to learn and that we can simply pick up where we left off. Now for many of us that might seem a pretty attractive and indeed reasonable project. Has it all really been such a big deal? What is the fuss? Why can't we stop dwelling on this and just get on? Well, because for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, *there is* something to be learned from our experience. And we ignore that lesson at our great peril! And this can well be summed up by our Lord's insistent plea in the gospel today: watch! Stay awake! *Stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn. If he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep.*

The besetting sin of the church – one that has followed us almost the entirety of our 2000-year history – is to allow ourselves to be distracted, to take our eyes off the ball, as it were, and to run after any and every shiny distraction. If comfort, ease and even privilege has been available to us, we have sought that, rather than the simplicity, the rigor and the challenge of the gospel. In the little parable our Lord tells us today, we hear, *it is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his own work.* We do have a work to do! But so often the core work of the gospel is drowned out, allowed to play second fiddle to all the other plans initiatives, agendas (and distractions) we come up with.

Watch! Stay awake! For many decades now, the church has more or less been sleepwalking through its existence. So much effort and time and energy has been spent on maintaining a veneer of civility, of seeking ever new and trendy ways at being

relevant, of conforming to every demand made of us by the surrounding culture. But, as the collapse of the faith in the west this past while has shown, this approach hasn't worked. It has left us with a weak, impoverished church. And it's an approach which does nothing to commend it to the world around us. And so, we have needed to be shaken from our sleep! We have needed to be woken from the stupor of our complacency. And *this* is what this past year should have done for us: woken us up!

We should not overlook that every easily we could have lost it all! What if this had dragged on for any months more, years even? The Spanish flu, to which this pandemic has most often been compared, took several years to settle down. Epidemiologists are telling us this has *not* been the big pandemic that has been long anticipated. In other words, before too long, one way or another, more of the same will come our way. What if what we lived with now occurred a decade ago? All the whiz bang technological means by which we have continued some aspects of our life just would not have been possible. What if a vaccine proved elusive? What if the state sought to acquire this entire site for the purposes of nursing the sick? We should not delude ourselves for a moment in thinking that any of those things are beyond the realm of possibility. Any study of the history of the church over the centuries shows that every conceivable deprivation and assault that could be visited upon the church has been visited upon the church! We should learn those stories! In Christ's solemn charge, *watch, stay awake*, we should hear the challenge to create robust and resilient communities, able to withstand anything that is thrown at it. Communities where each of its members know the faith, and able to *give reason for the hope that is within you*. Communities confident in our calling, our identity and our unique, God-given work.

My brothers and sisters, however hard the lesson and however bitter the pill, we have needed this sudden, unexpected visitation! And the lesson: now, *now* is the time to be serious! The half-hearted, complacent approaches to faith will not be enough to sustain us into the future. Be vigilant and watchful. We want the passion such as we hear in the first reading today from Isaiah, *Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down!* That is the kind of heartfelt, urgent pleading that should be the mark of our faith! In the mystery of the gospel, God hears this plea, he responds to this urgent cry: *tear the heavens open and come down!* This is what we celebrate at this time, in the coming of our Lord. God hears our cries. He comes to us, visits us in his Son. So, do not take your eyes off him! Do not fall back to sleep! Amen.