December 1, 2013 – 1 Advent

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When I was in college, I drove a school bus. It was a great job – hours that worked with my classes, no boss looking over your shoulder, summers off. But there were challenges, too – wading through knee deep snow to get out to my cold bus which was also covered in snow; middle schoolers who thought they were smarter than I was; and especially the very early mornings. One year I had to get up at a quarter to four, which was especially difficult if I hadn’t gotten to bed before 2 or 3. Hey, I was a college kid!

Some days I could barely keep my eyes open which was pretty scary, even though I never had an accident. There was one day in particular that I remember vividly. It was winter, so it was still dark when I was picking up the elementary school kids on my regular route. As I was driving down the road I sort of zoned out, then all of a sudden I was wide awake with a jolt of adrenaline. I had forgotten to pick up any of the kids along that road!

Or so I thought. I looked in the mirror to see how the kids I HAD picked up were reacting. Normally, they’d be all over me for missing a stop, but no one had made a peep. To my shock, the bus was FULL! I had made every stop and picked up all of my kids! And as near as I could tell, I had done it in my sleep! But I’ll get back to this in a minute.

Before I start in on today’s Gospel, I wanted to mention an interesting tidbit that I found about the Revised Common Lectionary, which we of course use and which has been adopted by many denominations so we can all be on the same page, literally, all over the world. I got this from the Working Preacher website:

“According to the over-all design of the three-year lectionary, the Gospel texts for the First Sunday [of Advent] are always apocalyptic, anticipating the Parousia, [which is the Greek word for] the second coming of Christ. Readings for the Second and Third Sundays focus on the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah’s first coming. [Finally,] the readings assigned for the Fourth Sunday proclaim the annunciation of the Nativity. Consequently, over the four Sundays in Advent there is a shift from anticipating the dramatic, disruptive consummation of all things to the more tender tone of preparing for the Nativity.”

So while I’ll talk about the specific Gospel passages that we’ll read each week (or at least in those two weeks that I’m preaching in Advent), I also would like to look at the arc of the season as a whole. Using the structure already given us by those mythical Revised Common Lectionary editors, along with looking at these texts as usually in the light of what action they impel us to take, I would also like us to look at the second coming, John the Baptist’s ministry, and finally the birth of Jesus in the light our two great sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

By the way, as a side note, though I always refer to the revised common lectionary editors as mysterious and mythical, I actually DO know who they are, through the magic of Wikipedia. And because I love you so much, I’m going to share it with you. Here’s the quote from Wikipedia: “The Revised Common Lectionary was the product of a collaboration between the North American Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) and the International English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC). After a nine-year trial period, it was publicly released in 1994. The Consultation on Common Texts is "an ecumenical consultation of liturgical scholars and denominational representatives from the United States and Canada, who produce liturgical texts for use in common by North American Christian Churches." There, now you have a useless bit of information to trot out at parties.

But back to today’s Gospel. In our reading, Jesus’ words are somewhat troubling to hear, but Matthew’s Jewish audience would have been used to this type of apolyptic writing from the Prophets of the Old Testament.

This passage is part of the fifth of what’s called the five discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. These are five speeches of Jesus that occur throughout Matthew, beginning in chapter 5 with the Sermon on the Mount and ending with this one, sometimes called the Little Apocalypse because it talks about the end times. In typical liturgical calendar fashion, we’re starting from the end, but that actually fits in with this week’s theme of the second coming.

Jesus’ speech here is at the end of a longer speech and the whole chapter is filled with terrifying imagery of the end times, with tribulations, cataclysmic events, and false messiahs. There are a lot of people nowadays , like the guys who wrote the Left Behind series, who feel they can predict the end times by comparing what’s happening in the world with this chapter of Matthew, and other passages like it. But what they often seem to ignore is the first sentence of our reading today: "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

In other words, predict away, but you can’t know for certain when these things will take place. This is where staying awake comes in. Jesus talks about the time of Noah, which was definitely a low point in the relationship between God and mankind, and how people just went about their business, and not paying attention until after their feet were wet. Jesus compares this to his second coming, which will take anyone who is not fully awake just as much by surprise as the flood did in Noah’s time.

But what does Jesus mean here by staying awake? It’s one thing to be on the watch for something, even if you don’t quite know when it’s coming but you have a time frame. Jesus is telling us that we will have no idea, that even HE doesn’t know.

And Jesus isn’t talking talks about regular alertness here, the kind needed to perform everyday tasks in order to get by in life. My cautionary bus driving tale is an illustration of being awake, but not really being AWAKE. Not being alert, but rather being on auto pilot. In the Noah story, people were going about their daily lives, presumably awake for at least two thirds of the time, but they weren’t paying attention and they missed the signs that God was angry with them for the way they were living. And of course a homeowner would be on high alert if he knew a thief were coming to his house on a specific day. But thieves are rarely so considerate as to let us know their schedule, and we can’t reasonably live our lives as if we’re about to be robbed every moment. That level of fear and hyper-vigilance would wear us out in no time.

We need help.

And we have it. Remember I said that I wanted us to think about our Advent readings in terms of Baptism and the Eucharist? Today, pay special attention to the language in the Eucharist prayer, in particular what’s called the epiclesis. This is the part where the Holy Spirit is called upon to sanctify the bread and the wine.

But we also ask the Holy Spirit to sanctify US.

Prayer A says, “**Sanctify us also** that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.”

Prayer B says, “Unite us to your Son in his sacrifice, that we may be acceptable through him, **being sanctified by the Holy Spirit**. In the fullness of time, put all things in subjection under your Christ, and bring us to that heavenly country where, all your saints, we may enter the everlasting heritage of your sons and daughters.”

At the same time as the Spirit is transforming the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, she is transforming us. Every time we say that prayer – and we are ALL saying it, even though I’m the only one saying it out loud – every time we say that prayer we are asking to be transformed into people who are awake and alert and looking for the return of our King.

And because sacraments are always effective, it works. We are transformed. Every time we take communion together, we are strengthened and refreshed, and awakened. Our original transformation happened at our baptism, of course, but since that isn’t a repeatable sacrament we have the Eucharist to remind us that we have been forever changed, or as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, we have put on the armor of light.

All this isn’t to say that we can rest and take it easy. There is still work to be done while we wait, like feeding the hungry, caring for the poor and sick, protecting the innocent, and spreading the Gospel of justice and peace. That, too, is part of being fully awake. We just don’t have to sit by the door with a shotgun across our knees swilling coffee to keep our eyes open. Let the Holy Spirit do that for us.

It’s the first day of Advent, so Happy New Year! Let’s make a new year’s resolution to be more and more awake to the movement of the Holy Spirit in every moment of our lives. There’s no time to start like the present!

Amen.