

The end—at least as everyone knows it—is near. The chief priests and the community’s old guard have reached their breaking point. Someone has to put a stop to this self-proclaimed Messiah from Nazareth, because if there is one thing people know for sure it’s that the Messiah will not come from Nazareth because nothing worth remembering has ever come from there. On top of that, they still can’t wrap their heads around his redefinition and exaltation of love as the essence of being in relationship with God and others. None of this fits with the story that they have told themselves all of their lives—that they hold the answers to the right interpretation of God’s Word. They are the ones who will enforce order. They are the ones who will be rescued by a mighty warrior in battle. That is the story that they tell themselves. It’s all they have known. And it’s all they *want* to know. So, as Jesus walks out of the temple this morning, they are hatching a plan to have him arrested in two days. They will bring him to trial, convict him, execute him, and if all goes as expected, his revolution will be silenced once and for all. Life as they know it can get back to normal. Jesus’s point-black call to have eyes and hearts wide open for the unexpected triumph of God’s power registers as nothing more than background noise to them.

---

Jesus’ critics, however, aren’t the only ones set on how things will go. So, too, are his friends and followers—all of those who have traveled with him from town to town, holding on to his every word like a dying man clinging to air. They weren’t expecting that God’s Son would come from a place as pathetic and forgotten as Nazareth, but they still believe that at any moment he will silence his foes and rescue them from foreign oppression. It’s simply not in their realm of possibility that their beloved teacher and friend, the one who has shown them light and life, could become die a brutal death. Even if they could imagine it, they would, like Peter, try and stop it because if Jesus really is the Messiah then he must be the victor, never the victim. But, Jesus’ words are just as prescient and critical for them whether they can grasp it: **“Stay awake!”**

It’s seems so obvious to us now that they should expect God to make God’s power known in a radical way. That’s just ‘cause we know that’s how the story ends. But when we’re in the midst of life everyday, we, too, will come up with stories and notions of how things should and will turn out—whether based on the past, the present, or some unsettling fear that shows up overtime we’re unsure of the future. That’s why Jesus’ words on this first Sunday of Advent are no less true, no less essential, to how we live and move and having our being today.

On this first Sunday of Advent, what is the story playing in your head? *That you have so much left to do?* Parties to attend. Goodies to bake. Presents to buy. Dinners to plan. Family to visit. Ideas to perfect. Or, you may think this holiday will be miserable and you have conditioned yourself to count the minutes and seconds until the Advent and Christmas seasons are over. After death showed up in our family, I dreaded this time of year for more than a decade. It was the sheer excitement and delight of my godson that forced to pay attention and see the joy of what's now my favorite season. Standing alongside Cal's wonder revealed the heart of Advent: *the darkness is near, but it cannot overcome the light.* In coming to earth God rewrote the story of creation, our creation, and in Jesus' second coming, God will see our story to completion. That is the basis of our hope—not in an improvement of our condition, but in the final victory of all that stands in our way. **“Stay awake!”** is not a call to be on edge for danger. It's a call to look for God everyday, because “that which separates us from God, either the heavens or holy of holies, has been torn asunder and can never go back to the way it was before.”<sup>1</sup>

The call this morning is not simply to get ready for Christmas. It's to ask ourselves what are the idols and stories we tell our stories that keep us from letting God's story break into our lives because God still speaks.

If the story that we often tell ourselves is that we must do enough good deeds in order to please God, Jesus shows up to tell us only I can make you worthy. When the world says you are a disappointment, God shows up and says: “but I have called you by name, you are mine.” When the world says you are not thin enough or pretty enough, Jesus breaks through and says, “Join me at the table and see that you belong. We need you.” Which story will you choose to live this Advent season? Busyness and striving or gratitude, honesty, and abundance?

Two days ago, singer and songwriter Nichole Nordeman “dropped off her kids at school and headed...to Starbucks.” As she explained, “I noticed an older gentleman...presumably homeless with a shopping cart full of belongings sitting at a table outside the entrance. Asked him casually if he'd like coffee and a breakfast sandwich and he responded with the following earnest questions:

1. Breakfast sandwiches at Starbucks are expensive. Are you sure this will not cause

---

<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, “Where Are We: Mark 13:24-37,” *Working Preacher*, November 27, 2011, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1145](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1145).

- a “financial hardship” for you or your family?
2. I am touched by your offer, but the breakfast sandwiches are cheaper at McDonalds, next door. I’d be just as happy with that!
  3. Will you also buy a breakfast sandwich for yourself? Am I taking your own breakfast money away?
  4. Are you sure you have time??
  5. Would you like to sit and drink your coffee with me?

[My daughter] asks me constantly about the “right” response to homeless men and women. How do they find the sharpie markers to write on cardboard? What if we give them money and they buy beer? What if their wheelchair is fake? What if they are tricking us? Her young heart is conflicted and confused ...the pure tenderness and empathy of a child colliding with the grown up explanations she’s repeating, of why we look away.

My answer every time: What if we just automatically assume someone is really hungry or cold or scared and it’s okay later, if we were wrong. Let’s be wrong. A half an hour later with Gary, three guesses who left the table feeling more blessed by the company and conversation?

The enemy says fear.  
The enemy says other.  
The enemy says calculated distance.  
The enemy whispers statics and rationale.  
God [shows ups and] says Gary.”<sup>2</sup>

Let go of what you think should and will happen.

Your present is not your future. In the face of fear and sorrow, God is breaking through. For it is true that for the Roman authorities, temple and community leaders, and Jesus’ friends and family knew it, the end as they knew it was near. What followed though was the beginning of the rest of the greatest story ever told. Your story my story. That’s the story worth telling and living because...

Outside of these doors you will hear that there are 22 days left until Christmas.  
22 days to try and perfect the imperfect;  
22 days to find the perfect gift that will bring a smile to your beloved’s face;

---

<sup>2</sup> Nichole Nordeman, Instagram photo, December 1, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BcLAumensYk/?taken-by=nicholenordeman>.

22 days to bring peace on earth in one fell swoop;  
22 days to get it right;

Stay awake though!

There are 22 days to be remember that God shows up when we least expect.  
22 days to remember that God breaks through the cosmos just to get a little bit closer to  
you and me.  
22 days to know that justice is the pathway to freedom, not shame, not secrets, not  
violence.  
22 days to remember that Love has come down, is coming down.  
We are being redeemed even as we speak.

For each and every day that the world and your heartache and pain and tell you that they  
think what's coming next, that your story is written, God says, " Uh uh. Just you wait and  
see."

The Rev. Dr. Maria A. Kane  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD  
December 3, 2017