

New Year's resolutions: Wake up! Be ready! — Judy Cox

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

This is the 1st Sunday of Advent; today we begin a new season of the Christian year, AND a new Year (Year A) in the three-year lectionary cycle. Have you ever seen a calendar of the Christian year? Let me show you this one, subtitled, "A Christian seasons calendar." It begins with the 1st Sunday in Advent, with the first page for the Season of Advent, the next for the Season of Christmas, then two pages for Epiphany (which is longer)...and so forth. Here at the end of the calendar, on the Saturday after Christ the King Sunday (which we just observed last Sunday) you'll find this note: "Christian New Year's Eve." ☺

Have you wished anyone a happy New Year yet today? No? Well, let's take a moment and turn to someone next to us and do just that. Happy New Year!

We often begin our calendar years by making resolutions. And our texts today have that resolution prepared for us: let's wake up! Let's be ready!

You see, Advent isn't just about Christmas—*Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger*, according to the King James Version (which always sounded pretty crowded to me). Advent reminds us of the promised upsetting, unsettling breaking in of God's Kingdom into our world, and that the fulfillment of that promise began with God's coming to us in Jesus. That promise is still in the process of being fulfilled. To borrow from theologian Paul Nuechterlein, our Advent focus should be, if you will, this "rupture" of God's gracious breaking in on us in Jesus, not a fear-full "Rapture." And this 1st Sunday in Advent we're called to wake up and get ready for the last bit of that "rupture," Jesus' 2nd grace-filled coming!

Most of you know about my embarrassing rumble strip encounter: how, chauffeuring our sons' quiz team at midnight, in desperation to stay awake I deliberately swerved onto the rumble strip of the highway and woke up everyone in the van, not just me! Thanks to construction zones galore during more recent road trips, I've had some more rumble strip encounters. You might have too, during the construction season in mid-America called summer vacation! With the highway under construction the old lanes were diverted off to the side, so our car had to drive on what used to be the shoulder, right on top of the rumble strip!—mile after mile of bone-shaking, sleep-ruining rumble. Whether you're driving or napping in the passenger seat (as Daryl was when jarred awake!), that rumble strip "ruptures" your journey and wakes you thoroughly. Think about this image: the season of Advent (especially in the first weeks) as one long rumble strip. To borrow from next Sunday's texts: when the Way of the Lord is being prepared, or "under construction," we're told to move over onto the rumble strip, to keep awake!

Today's gospel text shows Jesus using images like our rumble strip, but from his time. Think Jesus posting on Facebook: victims of the flood being swept away, field workers and food preparers disappearing, a midnight break-in by a robber. Some of us remember that "horror movie" that afflicted a generation of young Christians—"A Thief In The Night." And now we all know the source of the words to that (maybe kinda scary?) song Bob Munshaw left stuck in our heads two weeks ago, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready."

These images do seem frightening from a certain perspective, if we stay trapped in the “Rapture” theology that Bob critiqued for us. But when we sit awhile with this passage, we realize Jesus is helping us, alerting his disciples, and us, but NOT trying to frighten or shame us. First, we’re not supposed to stress ourselves over some secret clue about Jesus’ return that just keeps eluding us. No, we’re not dummies for not knowing—or if we are, we’re in good company! Neither the angels nor Jesus himself knows *about that day and hour ... only the Father*. What a relief—no pressure to break some hidden code to figure out the secret! Instead, following Jesus’ footsteps, we admit (happily!) that we don’t know (and don’t need to know) *that day and hour*. We need to rejoice, in awe and gratitude, in what this passage says about who Jesus is!—in how much he loves us, to give up knowing EVERYTHING (or being “omniscient”) to become a clueless human with us and for us. Instead of Larry Norman’s lyrics, let’s sing Charles Wesley’s song about Jesus’ 1st coming to us, as us: “He left his Father’s throne above, so free, so infinite his grace! Emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s helpless race. ‘Tis mercy all! Immense and free, for O, my God, it found out me...”

And the relief continues. In the Noah/flood example at least, the ones *swept away* (or taken) are those outside the safety of the ark—those “left behind” are clearly the safe ones in the ark! Neither of the men in the field, nor of the women grinding meal, are scolded for somehow “doing it wrong.” The point of all three actually seems to be that life-as-usual continues, and then this surprising, unsettling reign of God breaks in with the coming of Jesus, rupturing and upsetting that life-as-usual. Yes, a thief breaking in at night sounds frightening, but think about it. This thief is JESUS, who loves us and has come to be with us. Let’s wake up and fling open our door in welcome, not lock it in fear and grab our sword!

Is there a serious aspect to this getting ready? Oh yes! But “serious” doesn’t automatically mean “scary”! Our Romans passage helps us understand what “getting ready” means. We know what time it is, especially now, in this Season of Advent! We are in what theologian Karl Barth calls the time “between the times,” between the 2 “Advents,” Jesus’ 1st and 2nd comings. (Could we even say, between election and inauguration?) So we have to get serious and wake up! Paul posts some Facebook images of his own: no more taking it easy sleeping in—you get this picture ☺—the alarm clock ringing as we startle awake. Sunrise glimmers on the horizon. Look, our night is disappearing—in his resurrection from the dead Jesus has already broken the power of darkness—and although day is not fully here, it’s dawning! So we are called to *lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light*. Wake up and get dressed! And Paul restates this to explain: *Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ*. Get dressed in Jesus!

Can you hear it? This is the language of baptism! Can you see [this Facebook photo?](#): Christians freshly damp from the waters of baptism, wrapped in the baptismal white of the Church! We are to remember what God did for us in our baptism, when we were *buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*. (That’s Paul, earlier in Romans.) In our baptism we too have died, and are *alive to God in Christ Jesus!* Wesley catches this too: “No condemnation now I dread, Jesus and all in him is mine! Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine...”

Serious, awe-inspiring, overwhelming, yes—okay, the whole dying thing is scary as well as serious. But in our baptism we are dying and being raised, with Jesus. We are putting on Christ—and we keep on doing so, as we follow him. Does this waking up, and getting ready/getting dressed, look frightening here? No! It looks like loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, as Paul has just explained in the three

previous verses; we desire what is best for ourselves and for others, so we turn from any behavior that works against our and their good, against that proper love of our self and our neighbor.

Our Isaiah passage, too, posts some amazing pictures for us: God's temple raised so high that it's the highest of all the "high places" where the other nations used to worship idols. Look at the people of those nations, crowding to worship God! And look at how they're living out loving the neighbor—turning their weapons of war into instruments of blessing and provision! Think Humvee turned into a rototiller... The image of light, God's light, shows up again as well, summarizing: *come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!*

C.S. Lewis, Christian and author of the beloved Chronicles of Narnia, described his own stories as starting with pictures—mental images that came to him—and his story writing as connecting those "given" images. I'd like to add to our Facebook collection today one of his powerful Narnian images; I suspect it "came to him" from some of the lectionary texts this 1st Sunday in Advent, Year A! Toward the end of The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader the Pevensie children and Company stand on an island called the World's End, at a table called "Aslan's Table." Here food is renewed mysteriously every day, and sitting at it are three who, trapped in a deep sleep, cannot partake of this food. It's a moment not frightening but exciting, a moment that could be drawn from our texts today:

"Both [the old man and his daughter] held up their arms before them and turned to face the east. In that position they began to sing. ... And as they sang, the grey clouds lifted from the eastern sky and the white patches grew bigger and bigger till it was all white, and the sea began to shine like silver. And long afterwards (but those two sang all the time) the east began to turn red and at last, unclouded, the sun came up out of the sea and its long level ray shot down the length of the table ... Once or twice before, the Narnians had wondered whether the sun at its rising did not look bigger in these seas than it had looked at home. This time they were certain. There was no mistaking it. And the brightness of its rays on the dew and on the table was far beyond any morning brightness they had ever seen. And as Edmund said afterwards, 'Though lots of things happened on that trip which sound more exciting, that moment was really the most exciting.' For now they knew that they had truly come to the beginning of the End of the World."

The beginning of the End of the World!—that's where we stand, too, Advent reminds us, in this "time between" Jesus' 1st and 2nd comings. It's not frightening, it's exciting! We too have a Table with mysterious Food offered freely, but which those who are asleep cannot share. They cannot even see, let alone accept, the grace that is offered. What does our getting ready look like?—like seeing the grace offered to us at this Table, the grace of Jesus, and by eating the Food, accepting his grace and his salvation!

Today let's keep on looking at all these encouraging, not frightening, images offered by our Scriptures. And let's freshly resolve, at the beginning of this new year, to stay awake and ready by the grace of God, strengthened by the Food provided at the Table to which we now come.