

Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come...keep awake....

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and in the church's calendar, the first Sunday of a new liturgical year. Today and the following three Advent Sundays are significant for Christians for in observing them, we take measure of our awareness of, and preparations for, the coming of the chosen one of God, God's Son, Jesus. Centuries ago the church intended these weeks of preparation to be what it called, a "little Lent"—days of prayer, observance and devotion in which the faithful intentionally prepared themselves in heart, body and mind to welcome the Holy One—in the favorite story we will again hear in our Christmas pageant—of making room for Jesus to be born anew in our lives not casting him aside in a backyard barn or stable. The rigors and rules of those earlier days of preparation for Advent have given way through time to a more expectant, hope-filled observance (less austere) in which we are invited to re-ignite the joy and especially the hope marking the coming of Jesus.

Our gospel from Mark this first Sunday reminds us in Jesus' words to his disciples—of the call to attentiveness, the call to wakefulness and watchfulness. The words are challenging, even demanding: "*Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come.*"

The figures long associated with Advent: Isaiah and Micah, John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, and, of course, Jesus, the one for whom we wait—are prophetic, reminding us of who we are, and of God's promises calling us back to God's dream of us, his children. Woven into these Advent messages these next few weeks will be the idea of hope: hope for ourselves, hope for the world, hope for the lost and forgotten, hope for the least of God's children—not only the tiny Tim's, Bob Cratchet's, and little matchstick girls of favorite Christmas stories, but especially those these days who worry, wonder, and fear the loss of their homes, jobs and livelihoods of so many anxious about these troubled times. We Christians are called to be alive in hope, called to act in hope, called to pray in hope, and to be a source of hope for others in the world as we wait in joyful hope for the coming our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Many of you may have seen a production or read Samuel Beckett's devastating play, *Waiting for Godot*. Written shortly after the Second World War, the play offers a cynical, even nihilistic perspective in a world devastated by years of war, pervasive hopelessness, and despair. The play, filled with long, empty silences, is the story of two men distracting themselves eating, sleeping, talking, arguing, contemplating suicide, playing games, exercising and swapping hats in order to keep the deafening silence and the emptiness of their lives at bay while waiting for someone named, Godot to arrive. Godot is a diminutive, endearing expression for God. The two sad figures—Vladimir and Estragon (Didi and Gogo) wait under the same tree every evening to see if Godot will come and give meaning to their empty lives, their meaningless existence where there is no hope. They kill time, before time runs out and kills them. Didi remarks at one point, "Habit is a great deadener." This isn't waiting or being ready; it is simply existing, without faith, without hope-- graceless. In these two we sense humankind's inability to see or believe in the future—those without faith. This is the opposite of Advent's call to attentiveness these coming weeks.

Emily Dickinson once wrote" "Hope is the thing with feathers which perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all." It is the song we sing this season announcing the incarnation and birth of Jesus.

There is a little-known fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm entitled "Der Mond," or in English, "The Moon." It is a short tale that was adapted by the German composer Carl Orff into an opera in one act. It involves four young rowdy misfits from a land where there is no light – no sun in the day and no moon or stars at night. Like Didi and Gogo, these are people who "walk in darkness."

These lads travel to another land where they find the moon hanging on a tree. They steal the moon and bring it back to their land where they charge people money for their use of the moonlight. Eventually, as happens to all of us, they grow old and die. As each one dies, one quarter of the moon is cut away and buried with one of its owners until there is no more light. In the opera, Petrus, "who rules the sky," descends to the dead and retrieves the four pieces of the moon and hangs it in the sky for the benefit of all.

This tale is a modern retelling of the age-old belief that God brings light to the people who, in the words of the prophet, "walk in darkness." It suggests Advent, alluding to a new beginning, a dawning as in the early morn of a new day. Like the four young men, we can hoard and hide the light or like the character Petrus, we are called to share this light with the world.

In our gospel Jesus tells us a mini-parable, a story about a man who leaves on a journey and travels abroad leaving the servants in charge, each with his own task, ordering the one at the gate to watch with a sharp eye. We are to be gate-keepers, watchers for the dawn, those who send up the message and rouse the community. We are not to be caught sleeping or engaged in our own affairs and negligent of our master's work.

We face four weeks of waiting, and this first Sunday suggests that this will be an intense time, an invitation to shake us out of our lethargy, our self-absorption, and of our slipping into ways of the world that lure us from faithfulness.

Trees have long been associated with this season and its culmination of Christmas and Epiphany. We take a tree and decorate it, with lights, ornaments, tinsel, to remind us of hope, of faithfulness, of being "ever-green" and fresh. In the Native American traditions of the North and Southwest trees are called "the tall standing ones". They have a language all their own, and those who can understand this language are considered especially gifted and powerful within the community. They are watchers, those who see far and remember. Even their rings of yearly growth tell of times past and what they have known. There are many stories connected to Advent and Christmas. Here is an ancient one from the Cherokee, sometimes called, *Why are some trees always green?"*

Once upon a time when it was still very early upon the earth, the Great Spirit decided to visit the creatures of the earth, still new from creation. All of creation that the Great Spirit had shaped and formed was told to stay awake and to watch and wait for seven nights. Those who stayed awake were promised gifts, gifts of great power. Excited, all creation was alert and wanting to stay away to claim this power. Many thought it would be easy, boasting they would be able to fulfill this simple task.

Practically all creation made it through the first night, except for a few who slipped away and didn't dare show their faces. The second night, thinking that it would be easy, it grew very dark and there were no stars because of the thickness of the fog. It was harder, eyes were drooping and heads nodding. By the third night no one was saying much of anything, but walking around, jumping up and down, splashing water on their faces, singing aloud, anything to stay awake.

By the fourth night most were asleep, out cold, not even trying anymore, exhausted. And the seventh night came and only a very few were awake. And the Great Spirit came, found them sleeping, looked at those watching and waiting, and smiled. Among the animals only the owl and the panther has stayed awake, and so they were given power to see in the dark and from then on, they'd be night creatures, hunting in the dark, preying on those who had fallen asleep and had to rest at night.

Among the plants and trees there were a few who made it through all the nights: of all of them, the pine, the evergreen, the spruce, the hemlock, the cedar, the laurel, and the holly had been watchful. These were the faithful ones, and they were given the power to stay green through all the seasons of the year. And their leaves would have great medicine for healing of the nations. They would keep their leaves and needles while all the other plants and tress, bushes and grasses would lose them and have to fall asleep through the long snows until spring woke them up again. And so it has been to this day.

The expectation is that we are God's hands, God's light on this earth. God calls us to shine a light, to be witnesses to his mercy and love; not only through our words, but also in our works. We are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoner. When we serve those in need – like the student who needs tutoring, the lonely homebound person who needs company, those who have lost their homes and possessions through hurricane, earthquake, flooding or fire, or those who mourn – we, as in the words of the spiritual, "rise and shine." We are witnesses to the Lord's coming.