

My youngest son, Bo, is working hard these days to learn how to draw in 3-D. He spends hours drawing cubes and cylinders, and cone and pyramid shapes, trying to realistically capture the image of a three dimensional form onto two dimensional paper. To learn to draw things realistically, the first thing an artist has to do is to let go of what they think a thing looks like, and learn to see what's really in front of them. You'll never be able to draw something you haven't really keenly and consciously seen. Sure, you can draw a square and put a triangle on top of it and say it's a house, or a stick with a puff on top that you call a tree, but in order to really draw, you can't just make stuff up out of your head. You have to be fully present to all the lines, angles and shapes that make up a thing and then carefully record every one of those things faithfully to the page to create a realistic drawing.

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, the first thing we are asked to do as Christians as our new church year begins is wake up, be alert, notice and SEE! To walk in the light of the Lord, letting things that are hidden become illuminated. To SEE! We're being invited to be like artists – faith artists – whose first task is to wake from sleep and become more deeply aware of what God has given us instead of living in a world that we make up in our own heads. Today we are reminded that we need to be fully present to all the joy and brokenness of our own souls, and both the beauty and dread of this world in order to live fully and faithfully. And just as creating art on paper is a lifelong practice, so is living out our Christian faith and practice. It's something we'll never master and in which we can always deepen. That is why we need to be reminded every year, year after year: Sleepers awake! Walk in the light of the Lord!

The word advent means onset, beginning, commencement. The advent of something is its start, its arrival, and today is the advent of a whole new Christian year. The readings on this first Sunday of Advent are meant to get the year started off afresh on the right foot. So it does come as a bit of a jolt every Advent when the readings are not all comforting or uplifting. Despite Christmas being around the corner, there are no angels or shepherds in sight today. Just the admonition to get ready – because the day of the Lord is coming. And by the way, it's coming any day now! You won't know when, except that it will be at a very unexpected hour. So wake up from your sleep and be ready! God is coming to judge the nations. Matthew even says that God is coming like a mighty flood that will sweep away all those who are just going mindlessly about their normal day-to-day business. Like a kidnapper who will snatch two workers right out of the field, and pluck one from their work at the grinding mill – or in our day, computer desk. Stay awake and be alert! Be prepared because God will come when you least expect it like a thief in the night!

Frankly, with warnings like these, it's hard to know if the day of the Lord is a good or a bad thing! Will it be a day of light or of darkness? Joy or dread? Will God's entrance into our world be like the birth of a beautiful baby or like the sentence of a stern judge? Well, I guess we'll just have to wait and see. All we know today as another Advent dawns is that God *is* coming – into the world and into each one of our lives. There are parts of this assertion that seem very comforting and healing, like Isaiah's vision of the day of the Lord – in which the weapons of war on that day will be transformed into farming tools, and nations will no longer be at war. Today's psalm describes the day when Jerusalem will live in peace and unity. Imagine war torn and centuries-long embattled Jerusalem at peace! Won't that be a wonderful day? But there are other aspects about the assertion that God is coming that seem more than a little frightening – that remind us of our inevitable mortality and warn us to hurry up and do what we are meant to do before it is too late.

Ancient Christian monks and nuns would often use the pine box coffin in which one day they'd be buried as a bureau to store their belongings in their rooms. Or some of them would sleep in them every night. Why would they do such a morbid, Addams family kind of thing? It was because they believed that by keeping their own deaths constantly and undeniably before them, they would never be able to forget how short life is, and therefore how important it is today, right now, to be fully awake and alive while they still could. At our Vestry meeting last week, we studied a T.S. Eliot poem in which he wrote, "In my end is my beginning." This, in just a few words, expresses the entire Christian world view – that even in loss there is gain. Even in death, there is life. There is nothing, no

matter how frightening or painful or terrible, that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. So rather than run away or fall asleep to the glaring brightness of God, we are called to be awake to it all, alert and willing to trust and to love in every situation of our lives. Because God comes to us, not just at weddings, but also at funerals. Not just in beautiful sunsets, but also in car bombings. Not just in success, but in failure. Not just in prosperity, but maybe also especially in places of poverty and weakness of every kind. Wake up! God is in everything you see and feel and experience, everything *your neighbor* sees and feels and experiences, and today we have a whole new church year to commit to becoming more awake to the many uncertain certainties and certain uncertainties that are most certainly headed our way.

In an article written for the Atlantic Monthly in 1933, Helen Keller wrote:

“I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his early adult life. Darkness would make him more appreciative of sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound. Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. “Nothing in particular,” she replied. I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I become convinced that the seeing see little.”

The seeing see little. Every year Advent challenges us anew to wake up and see God’s creation – our world – our lives – our *selves* - not how we may assume them to be or we think they should be, but to see them with an uncompromising artist’s eye, seeing everything – light and shadow – and allowing reality to be absorbed into our observant and trusting hearts. And not only are we challenged to focus in with razor sharp clarity on ourselves and this moment in history, but also to open our eyes to discern God’s overarching plan for the Universe – the really, really big picture – the Christian world view of salvation history. We are called to see and understand ourselves within the context of something much, much bigger than ourselves.

We here at Christ & Holy Trinity in 2007 are just a few of God’s people in a long line of people who have been the church for centuries and will be for centuries to come. And as a church every Advent we are reminded that we cannot just draw a square with a pointy triangle on top and call it a church. (It’s just something I do on Sundays – no big deal.) Instead, we, as a church, are called to see the ever-changing and complex ways that the world is crying out in need and how it is that we, as members of the very body of Christ – are called here, today, in this specific place and time – and have been uniquely and specially equipped by God to reach out in love and healing to this broken world. We don’t gather here to escape from the world – to be asleep to the way life is. We’ve each been called here not just to hear about Christ in the past but to be Christ in Westport right now. To transform the world – to change our own lives and to change the lives of others! I realize that this is potentially a bigger concept than we usually want to take in on an average Sunday morning – something so awesome, it’s easier to fall asleep than to step up. But Advent cries out that when we wake up to things as they really are, when we wake up to who WE really are, that truth will set us free.

The message of Advent is that God IS coming into the world. God IS entering into each of our lives. God, in all God’s power, is coming – in ways we can’t predict and in ways that are far beyond anything we could ever imagine ourselves. God is inviting us into a life of three dimensional clarity, and fullness beyond measure – and undeniably toward that day when we will indeed beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. When nation shall not lift of sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Dear God, may each of us, and all of us at Christ & Holy Trinity Church, continually practice our Christian faith by keeping our vision sharp, for without vision, people perish. May we accept Your Advent challenge to stay awake, so that Your light filled and peaceable kingdom can indeed someday arrive. Amen