

Wake Up!

Luke 21: 25-28

Sleepers, wake!" the watch cry pealeth, While slumber deep each eyelid seaeth:
Awake, Jerusalem, awake!
Midnight's solemn hour is tolling, And [angels' songs] are onward rolling;
They call on us our part to take.
Come forth, ye maidens wise. The Bridegroom comes, arise! Alleluia!
Each lamp be bright with ready light to grace the marriage feast tonight.

Praise the one who goes before us! Let saints and angels join in chorus,
Let harp and cymbal add their sound.
Twelve the gates, a pearl each portal. We haste to join the choir immortal
Within the Holy City's bound.
Ear ne'er heard aught like this, nor heart conceived such bliss. Alleluia!
We raise the song, we swell the throng, To praise Thee ages all along.
(*Wachet Auf*, Philipp Nicolai. 1598)

And so, Advent begins. Sleepers, awake! It is time! Advent is a wake up call – not just open our eyes, but open our lives -- not only re-awaken life as a familiar routine, business-as-usual. It is to awaken to a new quality, a new focus of life.

Advent is here. God is born among us. The Holy lives in us. The new is upon us and calls us to be new ourselves. It is like an alarm clock that drives us from the comfort of a warm bed on a winter's morning. The proclamation of this season startles, arouses, and awakens. It is morning and that doesn't always feel like good news that calls us out of our comfort zones.

In Luke's gospel, someone asks Jesus, "When will God's kingdom come? "What will be the signs of the end?" He responds in the words of apocalyptic prophecy, but not about an end, about a new beginning. *There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and it will seem like all hell has broken loose!*

The apocalyptic vision of the "great and terrible day of the Lord" is a common element in the religious culture of the first century. The early Church saw the event of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection as a single apocalyptic event inaugurating the end of the age, the culmination of creation, and the beginning of the reign of God.

Remember that apocalyptic literature is a way of thinking that came into Judaism from Persia during the Babylonian exile some 500 years before Jesus. The religion of Persia, Zoroastrianism, transferred apocalyptic expectation to Judaism where it became joined with the idea of a Messiah. This expectation was translated into Christianity, and later to Islam. This expectation is completely wrapped up in the telling of the entire story of Jesus.

Expectation of a Messiah who would bring about the end of the age was at a fever pitch in Palestine during the time of Jesus. It is so much a part of the story of Jesus in the Gospels. Apocalyptic was a highly symbolic and dramatic form of literature intended to challenge those who are comfortable and comfort people who are suffering. These words are intended to encourage and stir us to action.

We live in an age in which the *new message* and *good news* of Jesus is now the time-worn message of institutional Christianity. The Church has too long been linked with wealth, intransigence, oppressive power, It has been opposed to scientific advancements, creative

thinking, and an unwillingness to be inclusive. We live in a new age, a new time, a new paradigm. It is a post-modern world growing *flatter*.

Is this a post-Christian world? God is doing a new thing. We are understanding God and God's presence in new ways. Whether it is post-Christian will depend on Christians and our ability to wake up to the new thing God is doing. This is not the first time God has done a new thing. Jesus came proclaiming a new thing, the transformation of the world through the inner transformation of people called the Kingdom of God.

This new thing shook the foundations of the Jewish faith and the new Christian movement was born – a new thing. Who knows what will be born this time? My hope is that the Church and her people will be reborn.

There is very little connected to the Christian mission, as it is widely perceived, that challenges our world at a very deep level these days. Christians expend so much energy on theological debates, protecting turf, and angry power struggles that I find myself asking, "What is new in our faith? What is vital in the presence of God born in Jesus that is being born in us today? What is it we can honestly celebrate at Christmas?"

Life is so much routine and rut, business as usual and even chronic pain, until something happens to derail us and turn our world upside down. It's usually something powerful and grief-filled: the loss of a person, a job, a relationship, or a home. It can be something larger: the loss of a dream, a sense of purpose, or hope. It can be something even larger: the threat of a humanitarian catastrophe in Africa or the Middle East. Perhaps these can be wake up calls?

Thomas Friedman, in his book, *The World Is Flat*, says that United States needs to wake up. There is a quiet crisis with our educational system that will affect our ability to compete in the new global marketplace. If we continue with business-as-usual, we'll continue to experience slow erosion. In this case, business-as-usual is undermining us as a society.

The fear of deep change is so challenging that most people in U. S. society are afraid. Maybe they're afraid in African and other societies also? People are afraid of such deep change. It's frightening to the Christian Church if God is really doing a new thing. We're familiar with the old thing. It's also frightening for Islamic and Jewish faiths as evidenced by the rise in fundamentalism around the world.

There is fear of what God may be doing. We talk a good game about being born again and of the new creation, but the idea of terrifying. Advent and Christmas is always about the new, what is being born in us, in our world, in this time. The good news we proclaim is still of God's love for the creation. God loves us, but the reality is it is tough love.

Faith is hard for modern, maybe post-modern, people. The challenge for us at Christmas is to believe, really believe, that God is behind the universe, that life is mystery and fundamentally spiritual. The challenge for us is to trust that, at the core of life, this mystery is personal and its nature is love.

There are three big steps for post-modern people in this season. The first big step is to find faith for ourselves. It is not just to accept what religions have said over the centuries about the underlying reality that life is spiritual. It is to really *faith* it and trust it ourselves.

The second big step is to be open to trust that, in Jesus Nazareth – itinerant teacher executed on a Roman cross 2000 years ago – the personal presence of divine mystery lived clearly evident. As a result of that life, we today understand the nature of that divine mystery we call God. We can incarnate that mystery and give birth to it in our very human lives. That's the second big step. There's one more.

The third big step is wrapped up in faith in steps one and two. The third big step is wrapped up in faith in steps one and two. The big third step is to *faith* that, in Jesus came the beginning of the real beginning – the breaking in of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, or whatever else it might be called. It is a new day of which the culmination is Shalom: peace and justice for all people. Can you trust this? Can you hope for this? It's time to wake up. The Spirit is on the move.

Wake up to this. We choose to trust by faith, to live the belief that God is, even though there is no clear consensus *how* God is. Wake up to this. Choose to trust, to faith, to believe that the God who is remains an active force in this world through people who choose to be open to channel the Spirit. Wake up to this. Choose to trust, faith, and believe that the God who is and who acts is motivated by, and acts in, the form of what we call love -- often tough love.

Another Friedman – not Thomas of The World Is Flat, but Rabbi Ed of family systems theory, tells about an old parable. When God created the universe, after creation, retracted himself. God chose to leave us freedom for self-determination, free will, AND the consequences of our actions. I trust that God still acts this way toward us today as a loving parent, allowing us the consequences of our choices. It's tough love. God still allows us the freedom of our choices and wants us, desperately wants us, to choose justice, freedom, and peace.

Advent is here and Christmas is coming. The Spirit is calling us today to wake up and step out of where we may be stuck or bound or too comfortable. The Great God of love whom we serve is doing a new thing. Let us be part of it.