

First Sunday of Advent, Year B, 2017
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Imagine cruising at 30,000 feet on a red-eye flight. You have the good pillow and the good blanket. Perhaps you just watched a sorta-decent movie and ordered a glass of wine. And now, you're ready to do some snoozing for the next few hours as you hurtle through space, interrupted only occasionally by light turbulence. Just as the rocking of the plane almost has you sleeping, you hear a sound. From about 10 rows back in the darkened plane comes the scream of a little baby. The baby is insistent and inconsolable. And you know, immediately, that this night isn't going to go quite as you had planned.

I have all kinds of compassion for that baby and all kinds of compassion for those parents. That must be a miserable position to be in. The baby's cry has been designed over millennia of evolution to pierce a very particular part of your brain. That cry demands alertness, even if you're not a parent. That scream is designed to get help from any available adult. There's something about the pitch of a baby's cry that can cut through any stray thought and scuttle any plans for sleep. Keep awake, indeed.

This is the first Sunday in the season of Advent. Over and over in our hymns, scriptures, and prayers, we hear "wake up!" It's a season where we attend to the world and look for the little lights in the darkness. Advent is an old word that simply means "coming," and these four Sundays are our time to prepare the way for the child who will come to Bethlehem on Christmas morning. This is also the Sunday that the church uses to mark the New Year. I think we understand those basics pretty well.

More puzzling is why we get these ominous readings from the Gospel of Mark this morning.

*In those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

These are the kinds of words you'd expect to read in an apocalyptic book like Daniel or Revelation. What are they doing in our Gospel reading while we prepare for Jesus? I'm delighted you asked.

I have a hunch. I suspect that these words operate in the same way that a baby's cry operates. They are to shock us out of our sleepiness so that we can attend to the needs of the world. When the poor and those who live on the margins of society try to speak, their voices are often occulted

by the powerful. And so, to be heard, the vulnerable have developed a way of speaking that is shocking. The Bible is full of this kind of talk—how the mighty will be cast down from their thrones or the wicked will gnash their teeth in the outer darkness. In other words, Jesus is coming, and you had better take pretty serious stock of your choices. It's all too easy to ignore the voices of the powerless, and so the powerless have written our Gospels in a way that force our attention. These Bible passages are the cry that won't let us sleep.

If we put our ears to the ground, what kind of cries can we hear in our city? Where are people crying out for relief, assistance, and dignity? I imagine we can all think of a few. Perhaps we hear a cry about the gruesome racial segregation left over from decades of business, government, and yes, church, practices that disadvantaged black and brown folks. Perhaps we hear a cry about kids in our city in such poverty that school supplies and food have become luxuries. Maybe we hear a cry about folks who are living one paycheck from homelessness. Or maybe it's the cancer patient who is in full remission but has more medical bills than any one person could pay in a lifetime.

The cries are real. And it's easy to turn a deaf ear or to get caught up in things that don't matter.

And so that scriptures demand our attention by painting a vivid world of signs and portents around the coming of Jesus, the king who will humble the mighty and lift up the lowly.

This year's Advent has an edge. It isn't all beautiful wreaths and garlands and candles. It's the cry of a world in need, begging us to attend.

And attend we will. You are not responsible by yourself to address all the ancient ills that exist in this city, state, country, and world. Indeed, you wouldn't even know where to begin. God is not unaware of the magnitude of the problems humans can create when we really put our mind to it.

But we, the church, the Body of Christ, we are responsible to be the hands of Christ in this world—to pay attention when we hear someone crying. To stay awake even when it seems pretty easy to sleep through the worst of it. The scriptures and the prayers of Advent are just the jolt we need to pay attention in a more focused way to how we can help this crying world.

You, friends, are God's eyes, and ears, and hands, and feet. You, St. Mark's, can attend to the least and the lost crying in the dark. The babies in need aren't just at cruising altitude—they're all over this city, all over this country, and all over this world. The need is great, but our God is greater.

We light the first candle of Advent this morning, not because it is pretty. We light it as an act of defiance against the darkness that threatens the children of God. And that candle lights the way for Christ to come into the world, as a baby, Immanuel, crying for his mother.

May you attend to the cries you hear this week. And may this one candle light your way.

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come....keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” Amen.