

KEEPING AWAKE

Advent 1, Year B: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

You know a preacher's losing the battle when he delivers a sermon on keeping awake! Unlike my late friend and professor, Delton Glebe, however, I don't enjoy waking people up by using a big voice for emphasis and drama. On cue, Delton could drop his voice an octave – and did – in order to bring home a particularly significant point in his argument and bring drifters back to consciousness. But as one who has been known to pass out for most of a Brahms symphony, a slow-moving film, and at least one of Delton's sermons, I have compassion for those who find the comfort of our new chairs and the gentle modulation in my voice soothing. For some people, their hour of power each Sunday morning is directly attributable to the shuteye they're able to have during my weekly oration. There really is nothing quite as refreshing as a 20-minute nap.

One summer Sunday in my previous parish, a visitor found the warmth of the Sanctuary, the gentle breeze blowing through the open windows, and my lyrical recitations irresistible. Within half a minute, he had slumped over in his pew, just three rows away from the pulpit. There was no one in the pews in front of him, and until he began to snore at a decibel level that would wake the dead, it was our little secret that he was not slain in the Spirit by a wave of religious fervour. His snoring, amplified by the resonant acoustics of the Sanctuary, was continuous, rhythmic, and deep. As I looked out over the congregation, never departing from my text, they were all valiantly, desperately trying to suppress loud guffaws. Their herculean efforts resulted in squeaks as air passed through the compression of their upper and lower lips, faces turning crimson as if about to explode, some looking from side to side to catch the eye of other worshippers who may well have been having a harder time of it than they were – which only made things worse – and then others who essentially dove for cover under the pews because they were unable to contain themselves.

No one, of course, could see what I could see, which was a whole congregation in excruciating pain attempting to stifle what demanded to come out – and I had to keep on preaching, main-taining an earnest composure. I was tempted to invoke Delton Glebe and lower my voice an octave, but I knew that acknowledging the disruption of the sleeping congregant would only make things worse for those who were already in danger of losing the battle of dignity and decorum. And so, I carried on, seemingly deaf to all the snorting and snuffling being generated by the stranger in the third row.

At the coffee hour after the service, people gathered in discreet huddles to confess how much they had enjoyed worship that morning, especially their entertainment during the sermon. No one, it seemed, had the courage to engage the visitor at the coffee hour, but he had no hesitation in beginning a conversation with me. To his credit, he did not tell me how much he had enjoyed my sermon that morning; but he did manage to disclose that he had enjoyed his Sunday off from the congregation he served in Goderich.

As my friend Peter Wall, collector and raconteur of countless Anglican stories every bit as ridiculous as this one, says, "You can't make this stuff up! You just can't!"

And so, it was with probably too much enjoyment that I latched onto Jesus' final words in today's Gospel to create a title for this morning's homily. Jesus' injunction, of course, intends a much broader application than avoiding the disruption caused by the sleep-deprived at worship. Jesus wants his followers to remain faithful and alert to the presence and reality of God during very trying times; to live their lives/our lives in the knowledge that we are not alone; to look for signs, like the fig tree putting forth its leaves, that summer is near, that even amidst what we may interpret as the judgement of God, to recognize the abundant signs of the faithfulness of God.

A couple of weeks ago, I had a conversation with one of our parishioners who, reflecting on apocalyptic passages such as this morning's readings from Isaiah and Mark, asked me if I thought the end was near for us. My answer was one of those yes-and-no answers that never really satisfy the question. First of all, I said that I didn't think that the end-times were upon us, only because every generation from Bible times up to the present has thought that the world was coming to an end. But then I said yes, that our willful rejection of the warnings we have received regarding climate change and the way we wantonly

destroy and pollute our natural habitat, planet earth, could quite literally bring about the end of the world by our own hand.

What is theologically accurate as we consider the message beyond the poetry of passages such as we have in Isaiah and Mark this morning, is that the judgement of God *is* upon us when we are willful; when we destroy life; when we abuse and disuse the gifts of nature that are required to nurture and preserve life; when nations and businesses and individuals hoard wealth and power, using it to accumulate even more as those in the world around them suffer with less and less; when we have the power to bless others and we withhold that blessing for selfish reasons; when we thoughtlessly rush into war and resort to violence as the solution for every international conflict.

When Jesus first spoke to his disciples about the reality of the first-century world, it was from a position of vulnerability. He and his disciples and the Jewish people living in Jerusalem during the Roman occupation had little or no power. He saw the destruction and desecration of the temple as inevitable. His message to them was a message to hang onto their beliefs, to have faith that God would prevail. He does not want them to abandon hope.

For us in our time, still disciples, but now with both privilege and power, his message needs to be heard differently. His words “keep awake” are a warning not to sleepwalk through life and not presume God’s absence. He calls us to look deeply into the world in which we live, to look at the human condition analytically, and to apply the gospel in order to bring about healing rather than destruction, and just measures in the place of systems and relationships that are oppressive. We have a choice either to live as the children of God or as those who deny God. “Keep awake,” he says to us: remember who you are; remember whose you are.

The season of Advent is an opportunity to immerse ourselves in the complexity of what it means to be people in waiting, people living in the already-but-not-yet world of Christ’s coming. Through Jesus, the gospel is ours to love, to embody, and to use for discerning the call to discipleship. We have in Jesus its full proclamation, and yet he turns to us daily and asks us to continue what he has begun. In a world that seems to have drifted off during his sermon, he calls us his disciples of every time and every place to “keep awake”.