

Title: Stop to Keep Awake

Date: 12/3/2023 (Advent 4, formerly known as Advent 1, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 64:1-9](#); [1 Corinthians 1:3-9](#); [Mark 13:24-37](#); [Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Advent-4-Stop-to-Keep-Awake-e2cprrq>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/lZsAR5cWahs?t=1470>

Do not, O Lord, be so furious,
and do not forever recall our [iniquities].
Oh, look, pray, to Your people, all of us. (Isa 64:8, Robert Alter's transl)
Amen.

Today, we are celebrating the fourth Sunday of Advent as many are celebrating their first. I'm glad we get to experience an extended Advent. It isn't because we're in some kind of race against other churches to cross the finish line to Christmas. It's because going into the season of Advent is a lot like going on vacation.

I don't know about you, but it takes a day or two for me to flip that switch from work to rest. I need time to relax from a mindset of constantly evaluating what I've done and what I still need to do...into a mindset of just being present. How many of you can relate to that?

Sometimes, it takes me most of the vacation to get to that point. Clearly, I need to get in some more practice. *ahem* It's a good thing we get to practice this transition to Advent every year.

The season of Ordinary Time started in June, and it doesn't end until Advent begins. When I compare the cycle of the church year to the cycle of the growing seasons, Ordinary Time is the season of diligent maintenance. Having planted seeds during Easter, we make sure they get the water and sunlight and nutrients they need.

We do whatever we can to help them grow, and we keep at it without really knowing what the harvest will look like. All we can do is our best, in the face of all the factors beyond our control, the oppressive heat, the lack of rain, the hungry critters.

After spending such a long stretch of time faithfully engaging in that set of disciplines and practices, it takes time to shift gears. It takes effort to step out of that well-established rhythm to make a physical and mental turn toward a new season, a new church year. For that reason, I've always appreciated that the new church year starts with Advent and not Christmas.

It's a good reminder that what we think of as the beginning isn't necessarily where or when or how things began.

In Episcopal 101, a series I do for people looking to be confirmed or received into The Episcopal church, I always do a class on church history. The first question I ask is, where or when did our church began? How would you answer that? (pause for responses)

We can name lots of different starting points (The Revolutionary War, Henry the VIII, Augustine the first Archbishop of Canterbury, Jesus.) You can also say it began with God; it began with God's relationship with God's people.

I've always wondered how many people who lived at the same time as Abraham or Jesus or Martin Luther were aware that a paradigm shift was happening. And for those who **were** jolted awake by that shift, I wonder how many of them were aware of all the factors- historical, social, cultural, religious, even personal- that went into what just **appeared** to be the sudden emergence of this new thing.

It is said that there is no such thing as an overnight success; it's just that we didn't see the days leading up to that moment. We weren't there when they struggled through the doubts and the hard work, the waiting and the lamenting, the crises of confidence and the ten other balls they've dropped along the way. And nothing, not a baby, not a business, not any kind of life-changing decision, comes into being without a period of gestation and nourishment.

The threads were already there, waiting to be picked up and woven into something new. The question is whether or not we've noticed, whether or not we're looking in the right direction, the right places, or to the right people.

Jesus said, "Keep awake."

We'd like to think that if we encountered the conditions named in today's gospel, we'd notice. If the sun darkens and the moon does not give its light, if the stars are falling and the Son of Man is coming in clouds, we'd start getting our act together, right?

Likewise, the writer, or writers, of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah expected that when God tore open the heavens and came down, mountains would quake, as when fire kindles the brushwood and causes the water to boil, and nations will tremble. They predicted that once God came out of hiding, we would no longer transgress, we would not become unclean or fade like a leaf, and we will call on his name.

Yet as we experience these extremes in temperature, such as Arborgeddon (was that just this year?) and the 78 days we spent in triple digit temperatures this past summer¹, I wonder how many people will treat them as God's reminder to us to care for the earth, to ask questions of our priorities and the priorities of our power companies and our government, and to watch out for those most vulnerable to this kind of heat and cold. As a church, I'm curious how our emergency planning can extend to those who live alone or are vulnerable to high utility costs.

In moments like these, some people will see the presence of God, and some will see God's absence. Some will feel an urge to invoke God's name, not to condemn God but to

ask God to show us how we might love our neighbors as ourselves, how we can, all of us together, be the body of Christ in and among the peoples and place of this world.

Jesus said, “Keep awake.”

I often need to remind myself that this is NOT the same thing as staying busy. Again, “keep awake” does NOT translate into “stay busy.”

Advent is when we make the time to step out of the hamster wheel of our daily routines to see where running in that wheel is taking us. The more we feel like we can’t afford to stop, the more we **need** to stop.

Instead of worrying about scarcity and security, let’s stop and look at what we already have, the abundance that is already in our lives.

Instead of adding up our chances of ending up in heaven or hell, let’s stop and look at the conditions we’re helping to create in **this** world, right now, and make adjustments if necessary.

Instead of being overwhelmed, let’s stop and look at the threads in our hands and consider which ones we want to pick up **and** which ones we want to drop.

Instead of powering through, let’s pause...and lament.

Instead of treating the readings we’ve heard today as predictions or recorded history, let’s consider how they are teaching us to pray.

Here’s where the DIY prayer at the end of your bulletin comes in. You’ll fill it out individually, and then we will all pray them out loud at the same time. I would love it if you’d share your prayer with me later, but ultimately this is for you. This is for you to pray for the rest of Advent. If you want to change anything at any point, you are welcome to.

After all, this is about noticing. This is about focus and intent. This is about laying it all out in front of God, even if we feel ashamed, even if we judge it ugly, even if we’re worried about coming across as weak or presumptuous.

This is about being awake to what’s happening in our own lives and all around us.

As I wrote this sermon, I found myself wanting to talk about this rather than do it. There’s always so much to learn and read and consider. **AND** it is just as important to engage in spiritual practice, to use what we’ve read and learned to develop a discipline of encountering God, in God’s creation and in the people of God. It is just as important to retrace the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles as it is for **us** to walk and experience that spiritual journey.

So, we’re going to make time for this now.

Oh God, we wish that you would show up in our _____ today!
Name the place- workplace, home, church, heart, calendar, phone!

Arrive _____,
They suggest a word like “quickly”, but maybe you’d want God to arrive in a more obvious way- “loudly” or “colorfully” or “repeatedly”

Then fill in your favorite name for God, i.e.-Creator, Parent, Holy Spirit, or as they prayed in Talladega Nights “eight pound, six ounce, infant Jesus...just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent.”²

We need you to end _____.
Think about this year, and all the years that have come before. Name something you want to be over, something you hope can be different. Whether or not you think the request is practical or make sense, write it down. As I said, you can always change your mind, but it’s helpful to put your anxiety, or dread or grief or lament into words, to see it in front of you.

We need you to start _____.
Name something you want to change or begin. Whether or not you feel you deserve to ask or can ask it of God, put it out there. Be honest about what you desire. Maybe even *gasp* demand it.

We know you have the power to do this. Listen to our prayer!
As someone I know likes to say, “God is not a vending machine.” When we ask God to listen, we are making a petition. We’re not expecting God to “obey”; that would put us above God. We want God to hear us, to tear open the heavens and come see what’s going on.

When you do this, we will feel _____.
Happy? Sad? We can want something to end and still grieve the ending. Overwhelmed? We know God doesn’t always answer our prayers in the way we expect. Tired? Sometimes it takes more effort to break a cycle than perpetuate it.

We can ask you for what we need, because we know you love us.
God has granted us the grace to put on the armor of light. May that light help us see our desires more clearly, help us see what has been done and left undone, be honest about where we have fallen short AND where we have been awesome and done the best we could.

We have worked and worried, and now we put it all in God’s hands.

Let us pray...
Oh God, we wish that you would show up in our __calendars__ today!
Arrive __assertively, You who know me fully and still love me__!

We need you to end ___the wandering of our eyes and attention___.
We need you to start showing us that there is hope despite all the terrible things_.
We know you have the power to do this. Listen to our prayer!
When you do this, we will feel ___that we are filled with the Holy Spirit_____.
We can ask you for what we need, because we know you love us. Amen.

¹ <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-weather/article/triple-digit-temperatures-100-degree-days-18359771.php>

² <https://genius.com/Sony-pictures-talladega-nights-the-ballad-of-ricky-bobby-dear-baby-jesus-annotated>