

Happy New Year, Atonemates. Yes, here we are, here at the start of a brand-new church year. Here we are, invited into the revelation of God's love for all creation once again.

And Advent doesn't greet us here with stylized nativity scenes or "*Have A Holly Jolly Christmas*" on overhead speakers. We can get that everywhere else. Instead, Jesus starts us off with a spiritual alarm clock. "*Keep awake, stay alert,*" he says. Nothing like beginning the church year with a shot of "divine caffeine".

And I don't think Jesus is necessarily trying to rattle our nerves. He's just trying to open our weary, bleary eyes. And Advent is just what the Holy Barista ordered. This is the season in the Church that asks us not to simply drift through our days but to live our lives alert, attentive, and expectant, like people who truly believe God is already on the move.

And as we settle into this new liturgical year, you may notice that we are no longer with Luke. We'll be spending a lot of time in the Gospel of Matthew. And that matters for us, especially right now. Why? Well, because when Matthew shows us a Jesus who is always inviting people to *pay attention to what God is doing right in front of them*, right in the ordinary details of everyday life. Matthew loves to show us a Jesus who slips into the world quietly, not with fanfare, but with presence. So it feels right that Matthew is the one telling us, "*Stay awake,*" because his whole story is about a God who breaks in when we're tempted to think that there's nothing new in the world to surprise us.

And staying awake is very different from being anxious. Jesus is not calling us to a life of spiritual jitters, (to keep the caffeine analogy going). Awake does not mean being wired on fear. Awake means being ready. Awake means remaining open hearted. Awake means we're leaning toward God's movement around us instead of being lulled and desensitized by the noise of the world around us.

Rachel Held Evans once wrote, "*We live inside an unfinished story. And the call of the gospel is to stay awake to the ways God is still writing and to take our place in the work.*" That is the nature of Advent. God is not waiting for us to become the perfect parish, or the most pulled together version of ourselves. God is writing our stories right now. So, the invitation is not to wait for something to *happen to us*, but to join what God is unfolding *within us and through us*.

And that's where I love the notion of God "breaking in." Not barging in, but revealing itself in the way light seeps in through a small crack in the curtains that let us know that morning has broken. Breaking through in a moment of compassion you didn't plan on offering or didn't expect to be offered. God breaks in exactly where we'd least expect ....in the everyday, the overlooked, and the downright inconvenient. God breaks in even when our lives feel too cluttered, too noisy, too chaotic for anything holy to fit. And somehow, God's grace still wiggles it's way in. Sometimes I think the real miracle isn't that God shows up, but that God keeps showing up even when we're half-asleep.

Paul tells us to “*put on the armor of light*,” and think that’s a really potent image. It’s not “put on the armor of trying really hard,” or “put on the armor of having it all together,” or even “put on the armor of pretending.” Light is simpler, and I think, very dynamic, at the same time. Light is clarity, truth, compassion, courage. Light reveals what the world tries to hide.

So, when Paul uses the word “armor,” he knows exactly what he’s doing. Armor is not fragile. Armor protects what is vulnerable. Armor helps us stand steady when the world gets discouraging. To put on the armor of light is to cover ourselves with the things that help us to stay awake and grounded: light is truth that steadies us, light is compassion and courage that strengthens us, and light is hope that shields us when fear tries to creep in. Armor is what a person wears when they expect to move, to take part, to show up. It is choosing to let God’s light be the thing that guards our hearts, guides our words, and directs our steps.

So, with the armor of light, our waiting is not passive. This is active readiness. We suit up in light because we truly believe God is breaking into the world now, and we want to be ready when it happens.

And so, I think Jesus’ question in all of this is really, “*What will I find in you, my Church?*” Not a question posed to us in a way meant to intimidate, but in the way a friend asks, “*How are you really, my beloved people?*” If Christ showed up today, slipping into the back pew or running into us at the grocery store, what would he find? Would he find us half-awake, waiting for someone else to take the next step? Or awake to compassion, awake to mercy, awake to the needs around us that are waiting to be noticed?

And ironically, it’s often in the middle of the most ordinary days that God knocks on the door. God has never required a perfect spiritual atmosphere to do his thing; God seems perfectly content to show up right in the middle of our scattered, busy, unexpectant, everyday existence.

Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it beautifully: “*God has this way of showing up, where we least expect it, when we least expect it, and inviting us to wake up to the fact that grace is already here.*” That’s the heart of Advent. Grace is not waiting for the pageant on December 24th to show up. Grace is happening now, in every hello, in every quiet act of justice we choose, in every bit of courage that rises in us. Grace is sneaky that way. It shows up before we feel ready to recognize or accept it.

And so as we move deeper into Advent, the question becomes: How do we actually stay awake? Not theoretically, not poetically, but in the real movement of our days. Well, one way is through small, intentional practices that help us notice God’s presence breaking into ordinary life. Simple things: pausing once a day to take a deep breath and ask, “Where did I see light today?” Or choosing one act of kindness each day that interrupts the hurry of the season. Or setting aside five minutes of quiet before bed, *not to accomplish anything*, but simply to listen

to our own heartbeat. These practices aren't grand, but they are wakeful. They invite our hearts to stay open.

We can stay awake in community, too. Checking in on someone who might be lonely this time of year. Offering forgiveness where there has been strain. Sharing a meal with someone outside our usual circle. These are Advent acts because they create room...for others, for grace. They make our lives more spacious, more ready for God to slip in.

These little interruptions are often the very places where Christ draws near. Advent is full of these quiet openings, and each one invites us to lift our heads, notice the light, and keep watch with expectation.

So as we begin this season, let's be an awake church together. A ready church together. A church that wears the armor of light as our holiday-prepping garb...together. And may Christ find us awake, expectant, and shining with a hope that breaks in all around us.

Amen.