

Advent 1
Dec. 2, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

I don't quite remember when I started looking forward to Advent almost more than I looked forward to Christmas. Perhaps when it was when Christmas (at least the cultural side of Christmas) started to feel overwhelming. Too much to do. Too much to decorate. Too much to buy and wrap.

Don't get me wrong. I still do all of these things and enjoy them. I love the traditions, the family gatherings, the time with friends, the glorious worship. But, as many have observed, Christmas preparations can sweep us up into a whirlwind of activity that can almost push our joy at the birth of Jesus to the sidelines. It can almost numb us to the joy, the mystery, the simplicity of the manger.

Advent, on the other hand, is a beautifully quiet and paradoxical season. It moves from today's focus on the end of the world as we know it – the return of the glorified Jesus at the end of time – then it moves us to challenging encounters with John the Baptist on two Sundays that invite us to look within. And then we move gently toward the story of Mary and Elizabeth, a story that invites us to anticipate, with them, Jesus' birth. It's a gradual unfolding.

But today we enter a scene that is almost guaranteed to break through any numbness we might have. Jesus says there will be signs in the sun the moon and stars. The nations will be distressed by roaring seas and mighty waves. The Son of Man is coming in a cloud with power and glory.

It is a vision of the end of time – the return of Jesus in great glory, perhaps something we don't think about a lot. The early Christians had a real sense of urgency -- thought about it

more than we do and expected it to happen any day. Jesus returning to make all things right. The scriptural imagery, though, seems solemn, foreboding.

And Jesus' advice to those who heard this prediction is "be on your guard." In other word, 'wake up.' Be alert. Be aware. Be ready.

This first Sunday of Advent seems anything but cozy and warm. It isn't Christmas parties and hot cider. It is like a flashing signal. One commentator observes that it 'yanks us off the hamster wheel of life!'

I often think of the writing of the late Anthony DeMello in times like this. DeMello was a Jesuit and a retreat leader. In his book, "Awareness," he writes about waking up from the sleepy way we often go about life.

"Spirituality means waking up," he writes. Most people, he says, are asleep even though they don't know it " (Now at a purely practical level, it's very easy to be sleepy this time of year. We're far enough north and at the east end of a time zone, so it is beginning to get dark around 3:30 in the afternoon. By dinnertime it seems like the middle of the night.)

Of course DeMello doesn't mean sleep literally. He means moving through life without a connection to what is around us. Without processing who we are and where we stand on the earth. Without appropriating and appreciating the holy – even in the every-day things and people who surround us. Being asleep, in his description, sounds a lot like simply going through the motions.

Sometimes that sleepiness that DeMello talks about is more like a kind of numbness to what is going on around us. A lack of interest or energy or involvement. Maybe even

avoidance. We wonder what we have become numb to – some parts of our life, our world, that we just doze through.

One of those areas well may be violence. There were something like three shooting incidents in one day here in the Spokane region recently, none of them a mass shooting, but all some kind of gun violence. I remember thinking as I heard this on the news that even one shooting incident in this community would be big news – but that day three seemed almost routine. God forbid, business as usual.

This year in our country we are averaging at least one mass shooting incident a month. A mass shooting is defined as an incident where four or more people, not including the suspect are killed. The number of non-fatal shooting incidents is in the hundreds. We wonder how we got to this place.

I remember last year watching my teenage grandson playing a video game that had to do with some kind of combat situation. Game characters were hunting people down and shooting them. I know that my grandson knows that the action in this game isn't something that he would do in real life, but even the simulation seemed violent and scary to me. But he and his friends would do this for hours. Even though the graphics are realistic, this is not a real scenario for them. Just a game about shooting people.

Or how numb have we become about the growing number of people in our world who have no place to call home. We have seen people trying to flee war in Syria or starvation in Yemen – simply trying to survive and keep the family together in safety.

We have recently watched a large group of poor people walk hundreds and hundreds of miles from Central America to our border with Mexico. They are regarded as some by a threat,

but by others as the face of a human tragedy. They are refugees and asylum seekers, many who are women and children, fleeing gang violence, poverty and the danger of every-day life. We see them on the news, but do we really see them? Only if we are awake.

Closer to home, the number of people sleeping on the streets of this city has grown steadily over the years despite the good work of Catholic Charities and other organizations that have worked tirelessly to provide shelter in many ways. There never seems to be enough space. Last week there was at least some progress toward more shelter space.

This past Wednesday as I drove through downtown on around 7:30 in the evening there were people in bedrolls crowded into the sidewalk space under the overpass on Browne Street. There are temporary encampments of homeless people all over town. Sometimes we find homeless men sleeping in our stairwells or on our porches here at the cathedral.

These are people. Children of God. People who are without a place to call home for any number of reasons. People who have experienced something in their lives that likely felt like the end of the world—at least as they knew it. And now they are living on the street, or if they are lucky, living in a shelter.

We do what we can. We host Family Promise in Jewett House. We support the work at the West Central Mission. Some of us keep ‘life pax’ in our cars – plastic bags with some non-perishable food and a few other items – and share those with people who stand on corners asking for help. But it will take more than a meal of canned ravioli and energy bars to address a sea of human need. Maybe in this season of waking up we are called to face that difficult reality that is manifested in our city and across the world and do some holy work. Not to sleep through it.

Advent is one of those times when there is a special call to wake up. Even a challenge to wake up. We wake up to be aware of what is around us. We wake up to be aware of God's presence in those expected and unexpected places. We wake up to be aware of our brothers and sisters with profound needs. We wake up to greet the Prince of Peace.

In our collect for today, we pray that God would give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Darkness is a broad category. In our experience it could be the tragedies of gun violence or homelessness or any of those things that impede this world from living in harmony, wholeness and security.

The light of Christ shines through Advent in a symbolic way as we light one candle at a time on our wreath. The light of Christ, present throughout our lives, shines every day through the darkness of our confusion, our sadness, our discomfort. The light of Christ, as our Advent blessing reminds us, scatters the darkness from before our path.

Advent is our season of anticipation -- of hope. A season of both quiet waiting and urgent awareness. Of waking up. We move, through these dark wintery days, toward the brilliant light of Christmas, confident that we are held in the love of God and emboldened to share God's love and light with others as together we wait and watch.