

Advent 1-B  
December 3, 2017  
St. John's Cathedral

There is an ancient story that is told of a young monk who went into the desert to lead a holy life. The monk, seeking wisdom for this journey, sought out the Abba – a man of great holiness. After a long trek, he arrived at the Abba's cave, and tapped on the door that was woven of palm fronds.

When the Abba appeared, the young man said, "Father, what must I learn to live a holy life?" The Abba was silent for what seemed like a long time, then looked the young monk straight in the eye and simply said, "Awareness."

The young monk was puzzled by the Abba's answer and thought the Abba might have misunderstood the question. So he asked again, "What must I learn to live a holy life?"

Again the Abba paused for a minute or two, looked at the young monk and said, "Awareness is awareness."

At this point the young monk was even more puzzled and even more convinced the Abba had misunderstood his question. "What," he repeated, "must I learn to live a holy life?"

The Abba, his eyes filled with kindness, looked at the young monk once again and simply said, "Awareness is awareness, is awareness."

This is a wonderful story with which to begin Advent – this short season of expectation, hope, awareness, and anticipation, that leads us to reflect on the coming of Christ – both in the birth of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas and the second coming of Christ at the end of time. It is a focus on eternity.

And it is that second coming that we focus on with today's scripture, reminding us of what we proclaim about Jesus every week in the creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his Kingdom will have no end."

This is the season that urges us to stay awake. To stay alert. To be aware of what God is doing in the world – what God is calling us to do and be as we prepare for eternity. The images in today's scriptures are anything but warm and cozy. They reflect disruption, disorientation, repentance, a time of darkness. Not exactly an Advent season of hot cocoa and cookies.

But the truth is, that they reflect a vision the end of the world – the world we as we have known it – in anticipation of Christ coming again. That is what makes them so challenging. Even though this is a scenario that is filled with hope (centered around the return of Jesus in glory) it is hard to get our heads around it, let alone our hearts. It is mysterious and perhaps even a bit scary.

I suppose most of us have had experiences in our lives that felt like our personal world was ending – at least metaphorically. Times that left us bereft or confused or disconnected. Not knowing quite where to turn. Everything from that first high school breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, to the death of a dear one, to the loss of a job, or losing our way through addiction. Or perhaps despair about an egregious issue of injustice, personal or public, that seems to go unresolved. Any of those things and more can make us feel like the world (at least our own world) is ending. This is not a comfortable place to be and we ask, "Where is hope?"

In Mark's gospel, today's passage reflects the expectation of the early church that Jesus, crucified, resurrected and ascended, would return very soon – literally any day – to consummate the Kingdom – ultimately to bring everything into harmony. It was important to be spiritually ready for that event. To be alert and aware. Paul also refers to that readiness, that expectation, in today's passage from First Corinthians as he speaks of that church of waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark's Jesus paints a picture in cosmic language of a time when the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give light and the stars will be falling from heaven (almost the visual image of a total eclipse of the sun). The Son of Man will come in clouds with power and glory, gathering up his elect. This is sometimes called apocalyptic language, something one commentator calls 'crisis language.' Crisis language is tied to historical circumstances, in this case the crisis for Mark's church was likely the impending fall of Jerusalem – the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. If we were to use 'crisis language' about something that threatens our world, it might emanate from the threat of nuclear war, the ecological crisis, or ethnic or religious intolerance marked by violence. This is not the stuff of tabloid journalism, but rather a call us to a deeper spirituality.

We find apocalyptic language in both the Old and New Testaments and its purpose (despite the sense of foreboding, disruption and disturbing images) is to energize, encourage or strengthen the community. Through these times of tribulation and disruption, God will prevail. In this case, Jesus will come again.

The purpose of this language is not to frighten, but to call people to wake up - stay alert and aware. To be living in the present moment. There is work to be done. But like the ancient world, we, too, might ask how God's reign might be revealed in these events, even if it is by giving us a kick in the pants to live in a more generous, peaceful and helpful way.

The parable of the doorkeeper underscores this. A man goes on a journey, leaves his slaves in charge and then charges the doorkeeper to be on the watch. No one really knows when the master will show up again, but they have tasks to do. It would not be good to doze off or goof off. The bottom line is "Keep awake."

Frankly, it is pretty easy to move through life half-asleep. Kind of zoned out, not really attentive to what is going on around us or focused on what impact we make on the community and world we live in. In a nutshell, this parable calls us to be aware and attentive to what Jesus calls us to do. It also helps us focus on where we find Jesus each day. Where do we see those places where we can make a difference in the lives of others - perhaps through something as simple as an ordinary act of kindness. Perhaps through an extraordinary act of compassion. How can we be Christ to another, even in the most unnoticed way?

Where also have we seen how others have reached out to us? A moment of consolation, an offer of help in a time of need? A word of wisdom in a confusing time?

Perhaps an Advent exercise for us is to practice the kind of awareness that seeks to notice these things and give thanks for both the opportunity to offer them and the opportunity to receive them.

Advent calls us to anticipation, awareness, expectation and most importantly, hope. The kind of hope we see in the birth of Jesus, and also hope in the eternal sense as we, too, anticipate a time when God's kingdom will be fulfilled. This anticipation and longing helps to form our prayer in this season.

I sometimes pray Morning Prayer from a Church of England app on my i-Pad. This last week there has been a prayer looking forward to Advent that seems to me to catch this intersection of anticipation and hope that we are living into right now. Here is a portion of it:

“In the darkness of this age that is passing away, may the light of your presence which the saints enjoy surround our steps as we journey on. May we reflect your glory this day and so be made ready to see your face in the heavenly city where night shall be no more. “

May it be so for us. Amen