

Isaiah 64: 1-9
Mark 13: 24-37
December 3, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
First Sunday of Advent

What a contrast there is between the scriptures we have just heard and the cultural practice of the holiday season! The public presentation is all happiness and everybody getting what they wanted for Christmas, including expensive cars and beautiful jewelry. Everyone is prosperous and merry and in a giving mood. The world has no problems. Everyone feels good.

And yet we who gather this morning hear cries of pain and confession of national sin. We hear Jesus warning about the imminence of the great moral catastrophe which will usher in the end of human history as we know it.

And yet even here Jesus states clearly that no one know the time and our when these terrible things will take place. We are to remain awake. We are to be alert. To refer to the parable of the wise and foolish young women, we are to keep our lamps of spiritual awareness full, ready to welcome the return of the bridegroom for what will be a joyful banquet. Then again we are to demonstrate our spiritual awareness by carrying out Jesus' ministry as he taught.

For faithful Christians this is a difficult way to walk. It is so easy to escape into the seductive materialism of the holiday festival. It is also easy to step back in self-righteous judgement of the festival engaging in easy cynicism and feeling superior to the mass of humanity who are so obviously—to us—spiritually lost. Such a world view is perfectly captured by the cold white world of C.S. Lewis' The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe where it is "always winter and never Christmas."

How do we negotiate these two expressions of despair? Be assured that both *are* expressions of giving up on God. The one is an escape into the temporary seasonal illusion that life is shiny material wonderland. The other is an escape into the cold world harsh self-denial where the possibility of joy is seen as a cruel hoax.

In short, as Jesus indicates, how do we stay spiritually awake?

The hard news is this: to remain spiritually awake we need to be spiritually awake in the first place. We need to have an awareness of a realm of life which cannot be seen, touched, tasted or heard. We need an awareness of a dimension of reality which is beyond the ability of logic and speech to figure out and express. This is what spiritual experience is—a personal and communal encounter with a power for which we have no words yet which we experience in the depths of our souls. This does not have to be an experience of Moses and the burning bush. It does not have to be Saul of Tarsus knocked off his donkey and given a complete change of life. Indeed for most of us this encounter with the Holy is in ordinary time in the course of ordinary activities.

The mystic Brother Lawrence experienced deep connection with God while scrubbing monastery floors. It happened to me when our children were of the age where more of their dinners ended up on the floor and it was my turn to clean the kitchen. I was grumbling about their mess until a whisper reminded me that the mess existed because *I had children*. Suddenly the mess on the floor was holy bread and kernels of corn and bits of fish sticks.

Most polls indicate that most Americans identify some experience of a power greater than themselves which is also deeply alive within them. This is very different from “believing in God.” Jesus said that even devils believe in God. Indeed I believe that over the years intellectual

assent to the proposition that there is a God has alienated many of us from owning our personal experience of the sacred beauty of life. We feel helpless to speak about it for fear that people will think we are weak of mind or have become religious zealots. Pastors of churches have been trained in the doctrines of the church and the content of the Bible. We have not been trained to recognize our spiritual experience and to help our parishioners to do to the same.

Waking up means breaking the trance of living on the material plane alone. It means realizing that linear time of minutes and seconds, days months and years is a human creation. The only *real* time is what we are doing *here and now*. The future is revealed one moment at a time. Most of us know this somehow yet the power of the worldly world is such that most of the time we don't experience our lives now. We are worried about the near or far future. We are full of hurt, anger or guilt about the past. We are irritated by someone sitting a few pews away from us. In short we are anywhere but *here in the presence of God*.

It is only when we become aware that God is not a concept whose existence can be proved or disproved and surrender our lives in trust to God's invisible presence that we awake from sleep to newness of life.

This awareness is expressed in the beautiful address to God from the early Christian church: "O God, *from* whom we come, *unto whom* we return and *in whom* we live and move and have our being." As we grow into this consciousness of the all surrounding, all embracing life of God which guides us from beyond and which breathes within us we begin to find our way in the midst of great sorrow and fear and happiness and pleasure. We find that life is most rich when we embrace the wholeness of life with triumph and tragedy.

Indeed we find this life when we allow Jesus to be our way, our truth and our life. When we pattern our lives on his, full of joy and sorrow and suffering and ultimate trust in the presence of his heavenly father, we begin to become more like him. We become signs of his coming again. Amen.