

Eyes Open to Hope
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What do you see when you open your eyes and look around? I see that we are already in winter – though it isn't officially here until the 21st. I see some evergreen wreaths, some candles. I have noticed other signs of the times: Christmas trees, carols, and a decided uptick in shopping mania. Welcome to December.

Do any of you remember Duck and Cover? (There's a non-sequitur!) Back in the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s (in other words, during the Cold War) the US Government, through the Civil Defense, advised a generation of young people to duck and cover if they saw a flash in the sky. The hope was, that if an enemy had attacked with an atomic bomb, there would be time between the flash and the reaction to get under a desk, cover one's head, and escape the worst effects of the explosion. You kept your eyes open, but were ready to shut them quickly if the worst happened.

For some, this stoked inordinate worries about of The End of the World (hear the capital letters) in a military-political sense, while churches talked about The End of the World in a religious sense. You prepared for a sudden, unpredictable atomic attack by being ready to duck and cover. You prepared for the sudden, unpredictable coming of the Son of Man by "keeping awake," and presumably, by going to church and behaving yourself.

If we fast forward to 2013, we have experienced other threats. After the attacks of 9/11, the US Department of Homeland Security developed a color-coded terrorism threat advisory scale. The lowest level was green (for low threat) and the highest was red (for severe threat). For about ten years, we never went below the color yellow, which was "elevated threat," with occasional spikes to orange and once to red in 2006. This raised many questions, from "what are the criteria for raising and lowering levels?" to "who decides?" to "what should we do," besides the general warning to "be vigilant, take notice of our surroundings, and report suspicious items or activities to local authorities immediately." The color-coded system was dropped in 2011, and now we have the National Terrorism Advisory System, which has two alerts: "elevated" or "imminent."

So we live our daily lives in a long-term state of preparedness, which keep us on the edge of fear. Today it is not so much the fear of the atomic explosion that will bring the end of the world. It is focused on terrorism, for which it is almost impossible us to truly prepare, and it leads to anxiety and helplessness for that which we cannot control. No wonder we would rather think about candles and carols and buying gifts (so much more manageable) and a sweet baby in the manger.

Unfortunately, Advent Scripture readings do not get us to that comfortable place. We tend to get predictions from Isaiah about some future utopia involving people streaming to the house of the Lord...something that is clearly not going to happen just yet. Threat level for that: low. Then we get Gospel passages, like today's from Matthew, with some very high threat levels - red or at least orange - advising us to "Keep Awake!" Do we dismiss these ancient writings, obviously based in an old world-view and obviously out-of-date, or can we make sense of all the predictions and warnings?

Well, guess what? If we are going to dismiss those difficult passages, we will have to dismiss Advent and Christmas too, because our celebrations are rooted in the life of Jesus "Emmanuel", which means "God-

with-us”, the one who would not stay safe, who would not shut up, and who never sang a single Christmas carol. In Advent we read about the one who promised to come again, not as a cuddly baby, but as the one who reveals violence for what it really is. We celebrate the coming of one who hoped and worked and suffered so that God’s future could be revealed in dramatic and transforming ways. He was not paralyzed by anxiety and fear – though maybe he should have been. He was not distracted by the need to acquire gifts and creature comforts – though maybe he should have been. The Gospel makes it clear that Jesus was as ignorant of the exact timing of crisis and fulfillment as his followers. And yet...he spoke with confidence and conviction, in heartfelt hope. His eyes were wide open on his dangerous path to a hill outside Jerusalem. His eyes were also wide open in hope to what comes to be beyond the cross.

I believe that Jesus was uniquely aware of life in the moment, in the Now, in the faces of those around him. He was attentive on a deep level to both need and joy. He saw human life as the setting for God’s advent, God’s arrival, and so he paid attention and stayed awake. In today’s reading, he gives a picture of common human activities: eating, drinking, marrying, working in the fields, grinding grain and says, even here, in the most mundane of activities, it is possible to be ready and awake to hope. Today we might say, two men are shopping at Dan and Whit’s...one is attentive, the other is mindlessly shopping. Two women are doing the laundry, moving from the machine to the dryer...one is attentive, and the other is just bored. Advent is a season that calls us out of complacency and boredom into a joyful and compassionate attentiveness to the beauty and pain and possibility of human life, into awakening hope. Because, with Jesus, we are waiting for the holy surprise that comes to our dark world, for those who watch and wait.

The Bible scholar David L. Bartlett wrote of this section of Matthew’s Gospel: "One day Jesus may appear in the clouds, suddenly, like a thief in the night. But before that – as Matthew reminds us” (in chapter 25) “– Jesus will appear just around the corner, suddenly, like a hungry person, or a neighbor ill-clothed, or someone sick or imprisoned." Or, I might add, as a victim of violence, whose condition cries out to us to beat guns into plowshares.

So today, on the first of December, I might ask, are we prepared, are we equipped to hope? Or are we so accustomed to threat that we can only cower down and hope to weather disaster?

This year, on the 14th of December, many of us will remember the terrible events of last year, when 20 children were killed in their school in Newtown Connecticut. There was no way to “be prepared” or to “keep awake” for such a tragic crime, no color-coded system of warning. But some of the teachers that day kept hope alive for the children. They did their best to keep them safe. They reacted in tender and caring ways to the worst violence that could happen – to a kind of “End of the World” scenario. Their hearts were ready, brimming with the kind of love Jesus embodied.

I pray that such an event will never happen again. I pray that all of us will be safe from those threats we cannot control, whether from an enemy nation or a weapon in the hands of the angry stranger. But more than that, I pray that we will find ways to work for peace, and ways to fulfill Isaiah’s plowshare vision. I pray that we will open our eyes, in hope, to those Jesus loved: small children, rejected women, paralyzed men, hungry multitudes, conflicted soldiers. This is the gift of God to us in Advent: the knowledge and conviction that we are so warm and secure in the embrace of God that we are not afraid, we are not vigilant for our own safety. The comfort we have received is so powerful that our eyes are opened to seek and to find each one in need. This season of preparation is not a time to “Duck and Cover.” As we await the advent of Emmanuel, God-with-us, let us open our hearts to see with the eyes of love and hope each new opportunity for compassion. Amen.