

Advent 1B, St John's Olney, 3 Dec 2017

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Isaiah 64:1-91; Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

S.D.G.

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

I can remember only a few times when I tried to keep awake. One is hardly worth mentioning; it involved a freshman year of college all night study session for an exam, and for any of the studying to pay dividends it would have been important to actually stay awake during the exam; though I did learn of the direct correlation between sleep and good exam results.

The other two times I tried to stay awake I was much younger, one was willingly undertaken and one was thrust upon me.

The first event was February 9, 1964; many of you will remember this event. My oldest sister convincingly argued with our parents the importance of me being awake for the debut performance of The Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show. I was among the estimated 73 million Americans who watched that performance. I do remember it, but also remember going back to bed as soon as the performance was over.

The next time I tried to stay awake was July 20, 1969; it was one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. Before they left for a party my parents had told me that I could stay awake and watch Commander Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. My older brother and sisters being left in charge had not quite gotten the same message so despite their telling me to go to bed I stayed awake and listened to the TV in the other room, and when it seemed the right time quietly slipped into the room to watch the event unfold in grainy black and white.

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Even when Christmas is already on our calendar we are to stay awake. Even when we know what is going to happen we are to stay awake. Most of you already know which service, or services, you will be attending Christmas Eve. You know where and when the big meal will be served, and when it will be time to open presents. Aside from the oddly shaped gift in the corner or what crazy Uncle Harry might say after a few too many drinks there will be very few surprises at Christmas.

I had no idea what to expect when I was put in front of the TV to watch The Beatles perform. No one knew what to expect when Neil Armstrong descended the ladder from the lunar module and stepped foot on the moon. But Christmas, and all of the surrounding plans, are pretty well plotted out on our calendars. But it is not for the known that we are to stay awake for, we are to stay awake for the unknown.

Through faith, and perhaps little glimpses of God's Kingdom, we have a sense of the unknown that is to garner our attention; and this is why we stay awake. This is why we are attentive. This is why we are alert. This is why we are filled with hope.

In very practical terms, Jesus is speaking about the fall of the Temple in the year 70 AD; he is also relating that unexpected event to the second coming, a time when the all the temples will fall and the Kingdom, God's Kingdom, will rise. Jesus is speaking of a time when there will be an unexpected peace; a time when justice will flow like a river; a time when righteousness will be like an ever-flowing stream; a time when the light of Christ will cast away all darkness.

During our recent camping trip to Assateague Island, even though I failed to photograph the sunrise, I had the opportunity to watch the sunrise on three successive days. Each day was different, and a surprise, yet each day was the same.

The best way to watch a sunrise means being awake in the dark of night, being awake at the coldest time of day. And for that sacrifice you are rewarded with the deep blue sky that comes before the first light of day; the blue that has come to signify the Blessed Virgin Mary and the expectation that comes with the birth of her child. That deep rich blue precedes a golden glow in the sky; a golden glow that is not unlike artists depiction of the golden glow that emanates from our Savior. Each day the expectant deep blue of the sky transitions to the golden glow of the risen Kingdom.

Each Advent the expectant deep blue of the long dark winter transforms into the golden glow of the coming spring. Each Advent the darkness turns to light.

That is what we wait for, that is why we stay awake; to see the new light, to see the unexpected peace, to see justice flow like a river and to see righteousness like an ever-flowing steam.

Just when we think that the world around us can not possibly get any darker, just when the temples begin to crumble around us, just when those without faith can no longer cling to hope, then the deep blue sky that is bursting with expectation yields to the golden glow of the risen Kingdom. Faith is why we stay awake.

We know that as cold as it might be, as dark as it might be, as unsettling as the world around us might be, the light of Christ will pierce the darkness with a golden glow. We know that the Kingdom of God will come at an unexpected time.

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Like a cup of hot coffee to accompany you as you watch the sunrise, this prayer from the Gelasian Sacramentary, one of the oldest Christian prayer books, about the 5th century, will be with you as you stay awake:

Let us pray.

Stir up our hearts, we beseech you, to prepare ourselves to receive your Son. When he comes and knocks, may he find us not sleeping in sin, but awake to righteousness, ceaselessly rejoicing in his love. May our hearts and minds be so purified, that we may be ready to receive his promise of eternal life.

Amen,