Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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First Sunday of Advent – November 30, 2025

Waking from sleep-walking

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Dawn and a new awakening

I suppose the first order of business is the question "How do you preach about the rapture?" to which my simple answer is, "I don't!" This is a central part of Jesus' message in today's Gospel reading, but I have to confess that I've never paid much attention to it. Maybe that's at my peril, but I'm not going to be able to atone for past ignorance this morning.

Candidly, the thing I most clearly remember about the topic of the rapture is a story about two devout church laymen – let's call them Frank and Ernest – who were discussing this very Gospel. Frank, after a lifetime of scrimping and saving, had just bought the car of his dreams, a brand new Lamborghini. In the course of the chat, Ernest said he was 99 percent sure that Frank would indeed be taken up when the rapture occurred, and when that happened, could he have Frank's car?

Actually, instead of Jesus' comments on the rapture, the more interesting text here is the emphasis on staying awake and paying attention to not only the lessons of the first Advent and the Incarnation, but to the anticipated Second Coming as well, which is what Jesus is also referring to here.

Some of you may recall that John Terauds focused on this in his homily just three weeks ago. That reflection woke something in my own consciousness that has been churning ever since. To make sure I didn't misunderstand or misconstrue what John was saying, I listened to his sermon online and transcribed it so I could re-visit it again. He was drawing on a couple of sentences from our reading that morning from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, dealing specifically with the idea of the Second Coming. Here's a portion of that text again.

"As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here."

John suggested that "the big Second Coming, the Second Coming that never seems to be coming, may in fact be already in our midst because we are the ones who have been called by Christ to be members of his body, to be representatives of his love and his healing and his teaching in this world." John also offered that this interpretation is the only way the Second Coming actually makes sense to him. And hearing that, I found that was basically true for me also.

So I'm wondering if Jesus could have meant to stay awake to see things he had taught with greater clarity? Maybe he was suggesting that instead of looking for a warrior king or prophet or savior to appear and change the world in ways we would have preferred, we need to wake up to embody him in this world by actively living those attributes and qualities he modeled in his time among us!

And as I see new perspectives on scripture in my reading of commentaries to prepare my own sermons, one of the things I'm forced to wake to is the reality that I have been sleep-walking for far too long a time with respect to the crucial dimensions and facets of Christianity passed on to us.

Related to this is a brief passage in the first chapter of Acts about Jesus' ascension into heaven. As the disciples are looking up, two angels appear and ask, "Why are you looking up, trying to find him?" One possible implication of this might be "Don't look up to find Jesus, but instead look around, and especially look within."

Recall that the disciples didn't always grasp what Jesus was trying to teach them during his three years of active ministry before his

crucifixion. And some accounts in the book of Acts on how they dealt with each other and the world around them after the Ascension suggest that they still didn't always embody his teachings in the way he had hoped or expected.

Staying awake is a profound admonition in the history of not only Christianity but in other traditions as well, including Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam. We also encounter this in that portion of Paul's letter to the Romans we heard this morning, "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." And the closing hymn we will sing today is an adaptation by Johann Sebastian Bach of a tune and lyrics by two other composers who preceded him. But with Bach's arrangement, this became one of his most famous cantatas translated simply as "wake up."

Jesus reminds us, "...about that day and hour [of the Second Coming] no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." So, "Keep awake."

It's frustrating to realize how much I have been sleep-walking through my life in the church, and in my professional, personal and family life as well. At this point in my ninth decade, I've begun to appreciate more clearly what I have missed, and how I have missed the mark in so many important aspects of my existence. So my goal is to pray more earnestly for the wisdom and wakefulness to be more present from here on in some of those things we are all called to be responsible for. As one of my favorite prayers in the New Zealand prayer book puts it, to ask to be more "thankful and hopeful and useful" until my life shall end.

But I also know I can accomplish this only if I remember that I can't do it on my own but, as we respond in our baptismal covenant, "with God's help." Advent is a perfect time to remind ourselves that God has given us one more chance to see how to do this. I prefer to think that this is what God wants us to focus on, and not the reward of the rapture, nor being left behind. And as long as, as John put it, "we don't expect God to behave in the way a strong man might who wants to change a country and change the way it operates." Just stay awake and do the work, because being able to do the work of teaching and healing and caring and loving is reward enough itself!

Well, as I regularly do when I get to preach in Advent, I'll close with my favorite poem about the coming of the Messiah we are supposedly "waiting for" again every year at this time. Here, then, is "The Coming" by the late R.S. Thomas, a Welsh poet and priest in the Church of Wales, and it offers a somewhat different back story on the event.

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant,
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

Amen.