

“December’s Lullaby”
Luke 21:25-36
1st Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2018
Westminster, Greenville
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When the German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison at the end of his life, Bonhoeffer compared being in prison to the season of Advent:

“Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent;
one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other...
the door is shut, and can be opened only *from the outside*.”¹

I got to thinking this past week about what Bonhoeffer wrote.

Advent, as we all know, is about waiting.
We wait for Christmas to arrive.
We wait for the Christ child to be born.

But what do we DO while we’re waiting?
Never mind Advent for a moment.
What is it like...the experience of waiting?

If you’re at the airport, and your plane is delayed, what do you do while you wait?

<check email, make phone calls, read a book, work, entertain yourself>

If you’re at the hospital, because a loved one is having surgery, what do you do while you wait?

<Maybe you worry, or say a prayer, or you leave the waiting room because it’s just too much...or you stay in the waiting room, because you can’t bear the thought of being away>

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter dated November 21, 1943, appearing in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, New York: Collier Books, 1971.

If you're sitting in church, and the preacher is going on a bit too long with the sermon, what do you do while you wait for the preacher to wrap up?

Don't answer that...

There are plenty of things that we do while we wait.

Let me offer another one for your consideration.

How many of you, while waiting for something, have ever fallen asleep? That's one of the things that happens when we wait, right?

Sometimes, we fall asleep.

But sleep is a funny thing.

We don't always have control over our sleep.

How many of you have ever fallen asleep when you wanted to be awake?

- For example, you're driving somewhere, and you stop to eat, and then you get back on the road and your eyes get heavy and your head does one of these—I mean, you're driving, you can't fall asleep...
- Or maybe it's this. Have you ever fallen asleep on an airplane, and when you wake up, you notice that you have this little bit of drool coming from your lip, and you wipe it off and look around to see if anyone saw you drooling on yourself while you slept?

Nobody's raising their hand.

Maybe I should stop using these personal examples in my sermons...

As we begin the season of Advent, we're turning to the lectionary readings for the season. The traditional reading for the first Sunday of Advent is always the second coming of Christ. And as strange as such text sounds to modern ears, each of the synoptic Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—all three say that the second coming of Christ has something to do with REFUSING to FALL ASLEEP:

Mark writes: "Beware, keep alert;
for you do not know when the time will come."

Matthew writes: “Keep awake therefore,
for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

And in our text for today, Luke writes: “Be on guard...be alert at all times...”

Do you hear the common theme?
To stay awake, to keep alert, to pay attention?

For the early church, at the time these Gospels were written, it's not hard to imagine why they needed to hear these words. All evidence indicates that the early church expected Jesus to come back right away. In fact, Jesus says as much in our text for today:

“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.”

So they waited...and they waited...and they waited.
And the years...turned into decades.
And Jesus had not returned.

By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, scholars believe it was a good 40 or 50 years since Jesus' death and resurrection.

And the danger was that those early Christians, after all those years of waiting for the resurrected Jesus to show up, to rescue them from the hand of the Roman Empire...the danger was that they might give up.

They might say, “Why bother?”
They might stop hoping and praying and anticipating THE ADVENT OF GOD in their lives.

So...for the 1st century church, our text is pretty straightforward.

Stay awake, says Jesus.
Don't fall asleep, says Jesus.
God is coming.
Be alert at all times.

It's a message that makes sense for early Christians.
 But what about these Christians?
 What about Westminster Presbyterian Church, in 2018?

Are you and I in danger of falling asleep right now?
 I don't mean during the sermon.
 I mean during this season.

This season of December that says go to this party over here, and then get your Christmas cards out next, and get your shopping done early because you're going to be traveling this year—and all these activities to do and all these places to be and all these expectations to meet...and you don't want to let anyone down.

So it's race to this and rush to that.
 And get this accomplished. And check that off your list.
 And before we know it, Christmas is upon us.

And whew...that doesn't sound much like sleep.

But maybe it is.
 Maybe in its own strange and frenetic way, all our running around diverts our attention from what God is doing in our midst...

That's the question that Jesus is asking us.
 As we wait for Christmas to arrive, what are you and I PAYING
 ATTENTION to these days?

While you consider your answer to that question, let me suggest three ways we might pay attention DIFFERENTLY, intentionally during the month of December.

Jill Duffield is a Presbyterian pastor who tells of a recent trip to San Francisco. As she was taking a cab from the airport, she says:

I made conversation with the driver.

Originally from Iran, he has been in the United States many years,

*retiring from the trucking business only to realize
that he couldn't live off of his Social Security payments.*

*That's what got him driving a cab, 16 hours a day, four days a week.
It's the cost of housing "that kills you," he said,
even though he lives an hour outside of San Francisco.*

"Sometimes," he said, "we really suffer."

Not long before we arrived at my destination, he asked what I did for a living. I told him I was a pastor...

*As he handed my suitcase to me he said, "Pray for me."
Then emphatically again, "Pray for me."*

Duffield goes on:

*I asked his name. I told him mine.
Suddenly, I saw him in a whole new light.
Not just a cab driver, but my brother, one for whom I had been entrusted to pray.²*

Now...Jill Duffield is the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, and she was headed to San Francisco to give a talk. What do you think was the most important thing Jill Duffield had to do on her trip?

Was it to give that speech?

Or was it pray for that cab driver...to remember him and pay attention to him and to see God in him...at the moment that they crossed paths?

Perhaps one new way for us to pay attention during Advent is to focus our eyes upon the STRANGER:

How many strangers do you encounter each day?
Do you remember them when the day is done?

² The Rev. Jill Duffield, The Presbyterian Outlook, February 11, 2018.

Do you take a couple minutes to pray for them before you go to sleep?

How many strangers have you treated with reverence recently—not just being polite as you walk by, but behaving as if that stranger might have Christ, hidden inside of them?

I don't know about you, but I have room to grow in the ways that I approach the stranger. You see, one of reasons I might ignore a stranger during Advent is that I'm preoccupied with myself.

That's where my attention tends to go.
When I look at what's going on in my life,
I usually make my worries, my concerns, the center of my story.

Does any of this sound familiar?
Any of you bring some worries with you here to worship?
Any of you had your mind wander to those worries during worship?

Not that our worries are bad, or even wrong.
But if you're anything like me, I know my worries can occupy a pretty large amount of space...in my day, in my mind, in where I put my energy.

And what does Jesus say in our text?

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with...the worries of this life...”

Hmmm...perhaps the second way that we can pay attention during Advent is by REFUSING to give too much attention to what we're worried about right now. Maybe Advent is a time when you and I can learn to step OUTSIDE of ourselves, and to stop letting our fears become the center of our story.

In his book *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande tells the story of Mr. L., who has just been admitted to a nursing home.

“Three months [earlier]...his wife of more than sixty years died. He lost interest in eating, and his children had to help him with his daily needs... Then he crashed his car into a ditch...”

When Mr. L. was released from the hospital, his children placed him in the nursing home, where he continued his downward spiral. He stopped walking. He stopped eating. He just stayed in his bed all day.

How do you fix that kind of problem?
None of the staff knew what to do.
Cajoling didn't work. Ordering didn't work.
But then...one person at the nursing home had an idea.

Someone at the facility decided to offer Mr. L. a pair of parakeets to keep in his room, to get his attention focused OUTSIDE of himself...

And lo and behold, things began to change.

“The changes were subtle at first. Mr. L. would position himself in bed so that he could watch the activities of his new charges.’ He began to advise the staff who came to care for his birds about what they liked and how they were doing...”

Before too long, “Mr. L. began eating again, dressing himself, and getting out of his room.”

When a couple of dogs at the nursing home needed a walk, Mr. L. let the staff know that “he was the man for the job.”³

Three months later, Mr. L. moved out of the care facility and back into his own home.

Now don't misunderstand.
I'm not suggesting that all of you go out and buy two parakeets for everyone on your shopping list this month.

But I suspect there's something you could do.

³ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014.

Some way you could step OUTSIDE of yourself, some ritual or habit that would help you to stop giving unnecessary attention to whatever fear you brought with you to worship today.

So...paying attention to the stranger in a new way...
 paying attention to your self, and your soul, in a different way....
 how about paying attention to your circle in a more faithful way?

We all have circles, right?
 Circles in which we operate and live.
 The circle of friends or family through which you make your days.

When Jesus warns us not to let “that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap”...I wonder if he is also reminding us to pay attention to the people in our immediate circle, and NEVER take those people for granted.

Have you ever done that?
 Have you ever taken someone in your immediate circle for granted before?
 Just kind of fallen asleep to their presence and importance in your life?

Don't do it, says Jesus.
 Stay awake to the people who are God's gift to you, says Jesus.

I understand that Ted Wardlaw was the Heritage lecturer here last March.
 I first met Ted during my days in Dallas.
 A wonderful person, a splendid leader in our denomination.

Ted once told the story of two brothers.

When the younger brother was born, the older brother had to grow up really quickly.

“Your aunts and uncles are coming,” his parents said to the older brother, “and you're going to have to be a little man. You're going to have to help us keep the house clean for them because we're going to be at the hospital a lot...He's very

sick...and the doctors aren't sure he's going to make it. He's what we call 'premature'."

This older brother listened to his parents.
He did what he was supposed to do.

Six or seven years later, when that same little brother had rheumatic fever, it was more time in the hospital, more family in town.

"You're going to have to call off that slumber party," the parents said to their older child. "We know it's your birthday, but your little brother's sick. And when he comes home, you and your friends will have to play quietly inside or play outside, because he's going to need his rest."

And once again, this older brother did what he was supposed to do.

A few years later still, when the family moved, the older brother came home from college.

"Son, you know your little brother's not really getting on in this new town. We were hoping he would enjoy hunting and fishing and things like that, but he's having a hard time with this move. We're wondering if he might not need to go off to school."

The older brother saw catalogs for military schools and boarding schools all over the house, and he also noticed that they just made his younger brother more withdrawn, more unhappy.

The younger brother didn't seem to have the words, yet, to put around his unhappiness. What that younger brother did notice was that his older brother began paying more attention to him:

"Hey Sport, let's go get a milkshake."

"Let's go to a movie."

"I want you to come see me at college for a weekend."

He paid attention to his little brother, and that attention made a big difference.

When his little brother became a teenager, the older brother began to notice something their parents hadn't noticed. He began to notice that the little brother asked a lot of questions about God and seemed interested in strange topics like church and creeds and catechism...And on his little brother's 15th birthday, the big brother gave him a gift—not a basketball or a golf club...but a copy of *The Book of Common Worship*.

That *Book of Common Worship* is still treasured by Ted Wardlaw, who is, of course, the younger brother in this story, as well as the President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas.

Ted still keeps an old family picture from that time.

It's a picture of a little baby, asleep in a crib.

And standing next to the crib, reaching his hand through the slats to stroke the baby's back while he's asleep, is a nine-year-old boy whose job in the midst of a crisis was to be "a little man".⁴

Now...it seems to me that if a 9-year-old boy can learn to pay attention to life in a NEW WAY...so can a 29-year-old, or a 59-year-old, or an 89-year-old...

During Advent,
we all wait, because
"the door is shut, and can be opened only *from the outside*."

When God opens your door, this Advent, this Christmas...what or who will you be paying attention to?

(Amen.)

⁴ From a sermon by The Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw, "In Defense of the Older Brother," originally preached at Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, appearing in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2002.