

Advent's Action Plan 1: *Keep Awake*

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Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and

have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. ⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.

²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. ²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that God is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Just three years ago, in the middle of the pandemic shut down, it was this Advent season that felt like the biggest challenge to be the church together while we were apart. At that time, we were not yet set up for Livestreaming. We had one stationary camera in the balcony focused on the pulpit. The pastors would pre-record the liturgy and sermons. Our musicians Jeff and Edward had a more sophisticated way of recording the choir singing from their homes and used a computer program to bring their voices together one by one to sound like the full choir. The Communications team pulled these pre-recorded worship components together and sent out the link on Sunday morning.

As we approached Christmas of 2020, aware of how meaningful the Christmas Eve Candlelight services are to all of us, we knew we had to ratchet up the production. So we turned to our church's own professional film maker, Peter Odiorne, and spent an entire Saturday in mid-December with a film crew to at least visually approximate being inside the sanctuary on Christmas Eve. Peter and his daughters came in during the evening the week before and filmed poinsettias and candles flickering in the widows, a taper lighting the Advent Wreath, the hands of one passing candlelight to another in the dark so that everyone watching at home would have the sensation of *Silent Night, Holy Night*.

On Saturday morning the Philadelphia Brass ensemble was filmed offering an extended Prelude. Then the choir arrived wearing masks and safely spaced out at a distance across the pews to sing the anthems and traditional carols. When they vacated the building, the pastors came in the afternoon to record the readings, the prayers and mediation. All the while the film crew had a few stationary cameras on tri-pods and a couple of folks circling the rest of us with hand-held cameras. My guess is about an hour of time went into each minute of that service to transport our sacred space into your homes on Christmas Eve.

When I got home that Saturday afternoon, my husband Larry said, "Well, how was it?" I am not sure I even had thought about this before I

said it, when I quickly replied, “Well, in 35 years of ministry, it’s the first time I started preaching when someone else said, *ACTION!!*” We do not usually think about Advent as a call to action. Rather, we treasure the birth of Jesus as a thing of the past. From Christmas cards to manger scenes to some of the greatest paintings ever painted, we have so many visual renderings of it; we are more accustomed to observing it like a museum visitor transfixed by the beauty. We tune our hearts to some of the most glorious music ever composed, to listen to the joyful drama of it all. Over time, I think we may have conditioned ourselves to receive the good news of Christmas in a passive way like carefully unwrapping a gift we’ve been warned is fragile. But in so doing have we overlooked how the prophets and the gospels call us to action?

My friend, Anna Carter Florence, who teaches preaching at Columbia Seminary has written a book called *Rehearsing Scripture* which challenges readers of the Bible to pay more attention to the verbs. Anna offers insight into how paying attention to the verbs helps us better understand Scripture. She writes: “Most of us enter Scripture nouns first. And when we do, our conversation tends to get sidetracked. The nouns in the biblical text are just so distractingly not of our world. Here are cubits and shekels, arks and archangels, manna and mandrakes, pharaohs and fleshpots. The book of Revelation,” she goes on with a good seasonal analogy, “features a seven-horned, seven-eyed, blood soaked lamb, which should under no circumstances mix with the other lambs and sheep and cows in the Christmas pageant... Focusing on the nouns in the Bible is like reading about a galaxy far, far away,” she argues, “and that in turn let’s us keep our distance.”

But verbs are different. We all have verbs, and the very same ones, actually, as every human being in the Bible. You and I share verbs with Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, with Moses and Miriam, Ruth and Naomi... And we share the same verbs with Mary and Joseph, Peter, James and John. We even share verbs with Jesus. “Isn’t that the whole point of the Incarnation?” Anna asks, “that God came to share our verbs.

The Word became one of us and lived among us. Apparently even God thought the best way to reach us was to meet us, verb for verb.”¹

Inspired by my friend Anna Carter Florence’s insight, this season we are considering these old, familiar Advent texts by focusing on the verbs. Together we will seek to discover what it means when God says to us, “Action!” Today, the Action Plan is “Keep Awake!”

Both of our scripture readings, from Isaiah and Mark, address the concern of people who are longing for the promised coming of God. Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann calls Isaiah 64 “the most powerful psalm of communal lamentation in the Bible.” The end of Isaiah 63 sets the stage as an exiled people return to find their city and their Temple, their homes in ruins. It is hauntingly reminiscent of the hostages returning to Israel in recent days, having been captured and whisked away without knowing the full scope of the devastation they left behind. It is hauntingly reminiscent of teenaged Palestinians, having been imprisoned without trial, going home to the destruction of their homes and communities. Isaiah 63 ends saying: ... *now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.*

Then our lesson begins with this wailing cry: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...* This is the anguished lament of those returned from exile, returned to the ruins of the temple and the rubble of defeated national hope. This is the prayer of the Ukrainian woman trying to shelter her family next to a pile of bricks that was once their home. This is the prayer of the Syrian father who cannot find enough food for his family in a massive refugee camp in Turkey. This is the prayer of the unsheltered teenager much closer to home who would rather sleep outside on the streets than fear entering an unknown shelter downtown. *O God, that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*

¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture*, p. 16-20.

Later, the gospel Mark tells us the disciples also voice this longing for the God of all creation to come down to redeem the earth's hurting places. In these few verses, in which Jesus warns about the end times, we hear the echoes of a long prophetic tradition. What Jesus tells the disciples quotes directly from Isaiah, Joel and Daniel, and alludes to Jeremiah, Deuteronomy and Zechariah. Drawing on broad images of the prophetic tradition, the gospel depicts a future when all the elements of creation will be shaken, and God's future return will be ushered in with a cosmic display of glory.²

All we are asked to do is – Keep Awake! Keep Awake to the signs – that God is coming. Being alert, on the lookout for God, Jesus is saying, will motivate us to engage in God's good works now. Our Advent call to action is to watch for the signs of God's coming, and thereby live into our genuine calling as disciples of Christ. We know what that means - daily to love and show compassion, to stand up against injustice, to work for peace. To shine the light of Christ, as a little flame illumining the darkness. In so doing we will Keep Awake to the movement of God within us and among us as agents of God's redemption.

A couple of years ago, in the middle of the night, there was an emergency need for a plane to land in a far-flung Alaskan village with a population of about seventy, mostly indigenous people. Facing a serious medical complication, a local girl had emergency need to be airlifted to the nearest hospital, which was in Anchorage, two-hundred-eighty miles away. The plane circled overhead, searching in the darkness to land, but the runway lights at the tiny state-owned airport had failed. "Any time a plane flies over late at night," said Ida Nelson, the town clerk, "you know something is wrong."

She and her sister who live near the airport, heard the plane, ran outside, looked toward the airport and realized all the lights were out. The light failure was a known problem, according to a local pilot, but the

² Brueggemann, Cousar, et al. *Texts for Preaching, Year B*.

maintenance workers have to fly in from other locations and it can take days to make needed repairs. So the villagers in the tight-knit tribal community sprang into action. Ida Nelson and her neighbor started making phone calls, rounded up and mobilized twenty people who drove their all-terrain vehicles to the rural airport, lined up and pointed their headlights on the runway. This allowed the LifeMed Alaska flight to land and airlift the girl and get her safely to the advanced medical care she required.³

That is what it means to stay awake, to do what you can to anticipate God's coming. Friends, the beauty and wonder of Christmas is not intended to be met with passive acquiescence to some magical moment long ago and far away. It's a call to action. Keep awake, Jesus says. We are surrounded by people who need us to be alert to the coming of God, and thereby be alert to the ways we can shine our light, alleviate suffering, save lives, pull together in communal action to make a difference for the world God so loves... so loves that God promises to return in full glory.

AMEN.

³ Neil Vigdor, "The Runway Lights Failed, so Villagers Used their Headlights to Aid an Airlift," *The New York Times*, Aug. 30, 2020.