

“Waking and Waiting” by Marjory Bankson

December 1, 2013

The First Sunday of Advent

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the liturgical season of waiting for the birth of the Christ-child. For the next four Sundays, we will be singing and speaking and praying with expectation of new birth in our own lives, in the life of Seekers, and in the wider world that we live in. It is a conscious choice to be hopeful, to believe that change is possible. We will be watching for signs of new life and renewal in the midst of our popular culture of cynicism and despair. We will be nurturing the promise that Jesus made to his disciples, that the Son of Man is coming again when we least expect it.

I really appreciate the questions that Koinonia is providing during Advent, reminding us to stay awake and pay attention. It's not news that we live in a culture that encourages unconscious consumerism or electronic distraction. Just watch the ads on TV or open the newspapers to check for available bargains. We are being swamped with enticements for the latest gadgets. But our faith story calls us to a different value system, one that includes everybody and is conscious of life's fragility and possibility.

In our text for today, death might come at any moment. Floods happen. Two will be working together, and suddenly, one is gone. Jesus will come “like a thief in the night.” Isn't that an interesting image for the Second Coming? Surprising, sly and secretive. Just the opposite of the blatant ads for the

Christmas shopping season which imply that we can buy meaning for our lives; that more stuff will make your life easier, better, successful or more entertaining.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the end of external domination and the beginning of a new age. Many churches call this the Second Coming, and suggest that only certain people will be saved as the world burns up or is destroyed. But the Gospel of Matthew speaks of Jesus as “the Son of Man,” putting emphasis on his human reality, not some cataclysmic endtime. If we read this text carefully, it sounds like Jesus will come again like a thief in the night, touching our lives individually, secretly, mysteriously. “Stay awake,” Matthew says, “you never know when it will happen.”

Here are the great questions that Koinonia suggested for this first week of Advent:

Where do I live in the routine and am “not awake” to what is occurring in my life?

Where can I have my work turn from the rut of routine into efforts that build peace?

What part of God’s world (nature, other creatures) can I celebrate by paying attention?

Sometimes the demand for change comes from the external conditions. The “days of Noah” came with howling winds and crashing waves to the residents of Tocloban, in the Philippine Islands just over two weeks ago. More than 5,000 people reportedly died in the typhoon. Yesterday, the Washington Post pictured on the front page another plane-load of refugees leaving Tocloban for Manila, where they can find more shelter and supplies. Those left behind cannot afford to leave.

Ron Kraybill, a Seeker who works on the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Philippines, suggested that our relief offering

be sent to a particular Catholic mission in Tocloban where some 5,000 men, women and children have taken refuge. Their flimsy houses have been swept away. Parents and children separated, some forever. Now the church is a sturdy shelter for them, a beacon of hope.

Sanctuary has taken on a different meaning for these children. The picture on our bulletin shows children playing (or staying) under the altar in one of the chapels. Brother Karl Gaspar, one of the Redemptorist brothers there, has been most grateful for our financial help in his email exchanges with Seekers. Sending money to buy supplies for this mission is one small way that we can “stay awake” to the suffering of this world.

The picture on the bulletin also reminds me of the saints that line the sanctuary of a Catholic church in Santiago de Atitlan. Many of you have gone on the pilgrimage to Guatemala, and seen the church where Fr. Stan Rother was killed by government-sanctioned assassins – because he was teaching indigenous people to lead their own church. The local people dress their saints for different liturgical seasons, and right now, they will be sporting new cloaks and scarves as Advent begins. It’s a reminder that God can be a good Father and a strong Brother in times of need. Their new dress is like the change of altar and bulletins that we have here at Seekers – a reminder to expect something new in this Advent season.

If death and destruction can come unexpectedly for all of us, then what is expected of those left behind? Brother Karl is working hard to provide food, shelter and sanitation for the 5,000 people suddenly stranded at their church. When Fr. Stan Rother was murdered, the catechists that he had trained continued to offer leadership even though their lives were in danger. Eventually, some 15 years later, a massacre of civilians in Santiago became the catalyst for peace accords which ended the civil war in Guatemala. But that didn’t happen without leaders who were willing to risk their lives in the

process.

For us, the situation may not be so dramatic, but Jesus has given us a picture of what a peaceful world would look like – there will be good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind and the oppressed will be freed. Because of Jesus, we know what the Realm of God looks like here on earth, but we often ignore how it might happen. It's easy to assume somebody else should deal with those issues unless Jesus comes to you like a thief in the night.

Koinonia asks, What would it take for you to shift your work from a “rut of routine” toward efforts that build peace?

We all see human needs that beg for justice and peace. When Jesus comes, we will recognize that we are the ones to speak up or take a stand. It might be as challenging as enforcing a guideline of “no violence” in this shelter or classroom. It might be as clear as speaking up for more racial or gender representation in a meeting. It might be as simple as taking a phone-call from someone in need, or listening to a member of your family with an awakened heart. What will inspire us to shift our work from the “rut of routine” to building peace and justice here on earth?

The first step, of course, is to SEE the situation and recognize that you are in a position to do something about it. In this Advent season, I will be praying for new eyes to see and new ears to hear. I will be praying for a new heart, one that is not so directed toward my own agenda. It's too easy for me to let my own set of deadlines block out the peace-making efforts I might be able to offer in a meeting or a class.

When I can set all the cultural distractions aside, and remember that life IS short, I'm not so tempted to “eat dessert first” (as the napkin saying advises), as I am to use my energy and attention for the things that really matter. I

call it “living in the light of death.” I think that’s what Jesus was telling his disciples when he said that the Son of Man would come “like a thief in the night.”

The third question that Koinonia has suggested for this first week of Advent is this: “What part of God’s world can I celebrate by paying attention?” I’d like to suggest that God’s world begins with your own body, with caring about what you eat and why; how you include physical exercise in your daily routines; how you do your work, no matter what that is; what you feed your mind and soul with – by what you read and listen to and watch.

God’s world also extends to your interactions with others. God’s world is in your home and in your neighborhood. There places where, simply by “paying attention,” you might shift the tenor of human interactions there. Are there ways to model some way of tending the earth as a good steward? Care for creation by your shopping habits? Is there a way that you could build peace and justice by changing the way you behave with others? Go to a city council meeting? Write a letter to the newspaper? Raise your voice about land use? Gun violence? Racial issues? Is there something you would like to change?

Why not take the four weeks of Advent seriously to prepare for some new call in your life. Just like a pregnancy, you cannot know what that new birth will be, but you can do your best to prepare for it – to clear space for something special to emerge.

In some ways, our culture has subverted this text from Matthew and rolled it into the story of Santa Claus. Expectant waiting becomes good behavior, “making a list and checking it twice,” rather than making a place for the Son of Man to quicken your life.

Let me close with this irreverent thought. If Jesus will be coming like a thief in the night, why not make a place for him

– and figuratively set out a plate of milk and cookies. Make a daily gratitude list. Examine your life and confess where you blocked the realm of God. Pray daily for someone you dislike.

At home, we will be doing that with four Advent candles, lighting one every night this week, as a reminder to STAY AWAKE and PAY ATTENTION. Jesus is coming again.

Amen.