

“Awake and Watching”

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

Few things are more complicated than trying to erect a new monument in the heart of Washington, D.C. Local committees, federal investigators, landmark boards, and one commission after another must approve each project. But despite these hurdles, on September 9, 1997, a gigantic crane cut through all of the red tape encircling Judiciary Square and lowered *a four-ton sculpture* to its permanent cement base.

What made this particular installation remarkable was the biblical symbolism of the sculpture’s design. Titled *“Guns into Plowshares,”* this 16-foot-high steel plow blade consists of *3,000 handguns* welded together to form the distinctive shape of the well-known farm implement. Artist *Esther Augsburg* and her son worked for two and a half years with the Metro Police Department. They molded handguns that had been surrendered by local residents.

This simple plow announces a *prophetic hope*: the longstanding hope for the day *when God will get God’s way*, a way that will be *grander than* one governed by judges, bailiffs and parole officers. In God’s society, *gunpowder will become grain to feed the hungry. Nations will be infected with love for each other. Armies will develop amnesia and forget how to fight.*

I think this is interesting because *Isaiah knew* that this hope might not come to fruition in his lifetime. He lived and spoke *in real time*. All he could do was use *future-tense verbs* and admonish people to start walking in the light.

In a similar way, Augsburg understood the challenge of creating an art object intended to persuade people to stop killing each other. *Has it had an impact?* Gang members did gather around the plow to discuss making peace on D.C. city streets. But they soon walked away from the effort, unable to let go of certain grudges.

It may be *our reluctance* to pursue God’s way that gives Advent its greatest *potency*. If all of us had the *least bit of passion* for Isaiah’s vision, and were less hung up with protecting our *little fiefdoms*, we wouldn’t have to *wake up* for Advent. We could *skip* all its dire texts. We could *ignore* the whole season and

pleasantly go about our daily routines, *stacking* firewood out by the garage and *kneading* dough in the kitchen.

But Jesus *interrupts* our routines and says to us, “*Keep awake. You have no idea when your Lord is coming.*” This seems to be his way of reminding us *that life is far too precious to allow us to put up with business as usual.* Even good-sounding *legislation* and sensible *justice* are not enough. Just ask the mothers of young children caught in the crossfire of gun battles on the streets of the nation’s capital or Chicago or Los Angeles or Charlotte. There is a more *godly* way of life available. Take Isaiah’s words *to heart. Yearn* for real peace. *Wake up*, for goodness’ sake, *lest* you squander your days on the wrong things.¹

In Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, a young woman named *Emily* dies at the age of 26. She asks the *stage manager* narrating the play if she can return for a brief visit with her family. He grants her the wish, advising her to choose the *least important* day in her life—which “*will be important enough,*” he says. She chooses to return on her *12th birthday*, only to find her father obsessed with his business problems and her mother preoccupied with kitchen duties. Emily exclaims, “*Oh Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, 14 years have gone by. I’m dead!*” Unable to rouse her parents, Emily breaks down sobbing. “*We don’t have time to look at one another. . . . Goodbye, world! . . . Goodbye, Mama and Papa. . . . Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you! Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?*”

It is this incapacity *to attend to the important things in life* that brings *urgency* to Advent. We sleep through *God’s signals of alarm* and act as if today is like every other day. *But if we are casual with today, what chance is there that we will be careful with our lives? What hope is there that we can live less selfishly and more peacefully?*

In an attempt to *rock us* out of these complacent ways of living and believing, Jesus presents us with *a most dreadful picture*—an intruder stepping into our bedroom while we’re sound asleep. “*If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into,*” Jesus says.

¹ Peter W. Marty, *Wake Up Call*, *The Christian Century*, November 16, 2004

The very *fear* of that nighttime break-in is the cause for a change in thinking, an adjustment in priorities.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was a 27-year-old resident of Montgomery, Alabama, the phone rang one night around midnight: “N-----, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.”

Years later, King recalled his *kitchen-table thoughts* after that phone call. He remembered the *weariness* of comparing the *lovely smile* of his newborn daughter with the prospect of someone killing her. Recognizing that he could *not* call upon his parents in his distress, King summoned that power that would help him find his way. “I had to know God for myself. I bowed my head over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it. I prayed. . . . and I discovered then that religion had to become real to me. . . . I could hear a voice saying, ‘Stand up for peace. Stand up for truth.’”

Where Isaiah used words *to prophesy*, and Esther Augsburgers used a *welding torch*, King used *his life*.

This Advent *may be* the moment when religion will become *real* for us too. *Who’s to say?*²

You know, one of the things I love about *the liturgical life of the church* is the way that the *Holy Spirit*, quietly and gently, works on us. Through the texts and prayers set out each year in *the lectionary* the Spirit draws us ever more fully into *the Presence*. If we read the texts in a *literalistic manner*, it can sound as though *week by week* it is God who is undergoing change toward us. In fact, *however*, in the *liturgy of the Presence* it is *we* who are worked on through the scriptures and the prayers, *we* who get to be *reconfigured* and brought into the life of the changeless One.

And at Advent, it begins *again*: the cycle by which God breaks *through the clutter of our lives* to announce to us that *the Presence* is very near, *erupting* into our

² Ibid.

midst, *hauling* us out of our *myths*, our *half-truths* and the ways we have *settled* for what is *religious* rather than what is *holy, alive and real*.

So lest we be *tempted* to think that Advent is merely a religious *warm-up* for Christmas, let us see if we can *allow* ourselves to be brought near the *cold-water spigot* whose *splashes* can *chasten* us into *reality*.³

Which reminds me that the *table fellowship* that Jesus hosts in the synoptic Gospels is one of the *primary settings of* and *symbols for* the *grace* that God offers. The table is open for *all—no one is coerced*. The only exclusions are *self-exclusions*, those who choose not to come. Those who come may be *transformed*. They may leave the table as *different persons* with *new instructions, new commitments and new relationships*.

Perhaps the *image of table fellowship* is what finally helps us *integrate* the *apocalyptic and eschatological* imagery of the Bible with the unconditional love of God. *Our response is required. Human life is not without limits*. Without coming to the table and without *being open* to what happens at the table, we cannot participate in its fellowship. God's unconditional love and human response to that love are *not oppositions* but *integral movements* in the *dance* we know as *grace*. God's *fierce beauty* and *ever-comforting arms* are one.⁴

³ James Allison, *Punctured*, The Christian Century, November 13, 2007

⁴ Mary Schertz, *Living by the Word*, The Christian Century, November 18, 2010