

Staying Awake: Life without Caffeine

Readings for First Week of Advent,

December 2, 2007

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalms 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24: 37-44

Swords into plowshares. Light triumphing over darkness. The demise of rivalry and jealousy. Sounds great--Sign me up!

Our readings for this first week of Advent set the stage well for the beginning of the new liturgical year and the unfolding of Matthew's account of Jesus' time amongst us. There's change in the wind. There's good things brewing. The Lord is coming--Let's see what happens!

Eerrrrnt--sorry, that's the wrong answer--but thanks for playing...

Each of these readings, from Isaiah the visionary, David the psalmist, Paul the zealot and, most directly, Matthew the most prolific chronicler of Jesus' years on this earth, challenges us readers not to merely watch, not to merely observe, not to merely see what happens--but having paid real attention, to make things happen.

In Isaiah and David, amid the joyous prophecy of a Jewish kingdom to which all nations shall be drawn, there is an all important qualifier of why the nations would come. Is it because the Jewish God would win in a smackdown between the Great Yahweh and the Mighty Baal? Is it because The Temple of Jerusalem would get better architectural reviews in the Fertile Crescent Times than the Temple of Nineveh? Or because the Jewish succession of kings David and Solomon fared better in focus groups than their conquerors Nabuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great?

Hardly!

In Isaiah and David's vision, people would not only come to Israel, but stream to it, for one reason: "...That the God of Jacob, may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths."

Why would these non-Jewish nations want the instruction of the God of Jacob? They'd want it because they'd see from the way the Israelites behaved that the Jewish god was a God of peace, of reconciliation, of compassion, a light in a world with more than its share of war, division and darkness. They'd see how the people of Israel not only knew their God's instruction, but how they walked the talk of God's commands. The nations would see that in Israel, the hungry were fed, the orphans and widows were cared for, the stranger was welcomed. They'd see that the Hebrew community knew something about living in integrity. They'd see a society that was truly just, and that truly worked--for everyone,

Paul's letter to the church in Rome amps up the visionary picture drawn by Isaiah by offering a challenge to those who might be waiting for that wistful future foretold by the prophet: "Hey guys--WAKE UP! This vision is not going to happen if you are sleep-walking, or blind to your real potential, worrying about and catering to your earthly cravings, your rivalries, your jealousies! You are bigger than that, and meant for better than that."

Yes, Paul was rather convinced that the end of the world, the Second Coming of Christ, was something that he'd see in his own lifetime, but the little matter of his miscalculated timing does not in the least diminish the timeliness and timelessness of his admonition: "Wake up--- there's work to be done. Swords to be plowshared, Spears to be pruning-hooked. Light to be walked into."

Matthew takes the challenge home with his "stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come!"

It's easy for us to see these words of Jesus as his admonition that we be ready for "the end" as in the Apocalyptic, biblical sense of the end of the world.

Actually, it's a bit too easy.

"The end" isn't about some global disaster (although a social justice/environmental read of scripture can certainly support the idea that our human behavior has deep implications in the evolution or devolution of the planet) but, rather, touches on a much more personal nerve of self awareness and personal responsibility.

Jesus' admonition "you don't know when the end is coming, so be awake" is a theme not unique to Matthew, but an important thrust of all the Gospels, reminding us less of the inevitability of "the end," and more of the preciousness of present, the gift of whatever time we have. Jesus invites us to be awake, living our lives fully aware of each moment's beauty; making that long-postponed apology now; burying that hatchet today; playing that silly game with the kids tonight; playing that silly game with the grownups, too.

Jesus calls us to be fully-conscious in our relationships, attentive, responsive, vulnerable, vocal, telling your migraine-inducing son, your derelict dad, your grump-of-the-century husband, that you love him. And showing it. Spending time. Spending money. Giving it away. Singing more. Dancing more. Kissing more.

And Jesus challenges us, in the spirit of Isaiah and Paul with the quintessential Advent questions: what are we doing to prepare the way for the King of peace, reconciliation, compassion and justice whom we profess to welcome at Christmas? Will "the nations" (heck, will the neighbors!) see in the way we live, that the hungry are fed, the orphans and widows are cared for, the stranger is welcomed? And, as this Advent unfolds, will the Christ who is ever-present, and yet to come, recognize our home, our city, our country, our planet as the place where peace and justice meet?

This fragile world needs us to be wide awake this Advent. Attentive. Openhearted. Ever-developing our awareness of God's defining presence, and moving from that awareness into the action that brings the birth of the New Day we celebrate at Christmas. May our spiritual practice this Advent fuel us in this work, even more than the caffeine we crave each morning.