

"Keep Awake"

Romans 13:11-14 & Matthew 24:36-44

December 2, 2007

I would like to share with you a couple of great quotes I ran into this week. Listen and give them a bit of thought as we enter into this Advent season of waiting, watching and preparing for the coming of our God. The first told quote is attributed to a man named William Sloan Coffin. I loved the way he said this: *"We have learned to soar through the air like birds, to swim through the seas like fish, to soar through space like comets. Now it is high time we learned to walk the earth as the children of our God."*

The second told of someone who once asked Wayne Gretsky, the great hockey player, how he managed to become the best goal-scorer in the history of the game. He simply replied, *"While everyone else is chasing the puck, I go where the puck is going to be."*

How are we going to be the people of God that we have been called to be? What are the important factors in how we live our lives? What will make us succeed in being the kind of person that we want to be - the kind of person God wants us to be? Advent tells us to be alert - know that something big is coming - anticipate - prepare - be ready!

There was a Sunday school teacher who asked her children as they were on the way to church service one Sunday morning, 'And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?' One bright little girl replied, 'Because people are sleeping.'

Keep awake! It is one of my favorite admonitions in scripture. It is a core theme for the advent season. Something important is going to happen. Our God wants to come to us! He will come to walk with us. He will come to lift us when we are too weak to stand on our own. He will come to bring us home to be with Him for eternity. He will come to redeem all of creation. You and I do not know when any of those special events are going to happen. If we are going to be ready - if we are not going to be caught unprepared we need to 'keep awake' - we need to anticipate and prepare quickly for our God does come!

Jesus used several fascinating images to call us to preparedness. He reminds us of the days of Noah when the flood came and Noah was the only one prepared. He told of two people work side by side in the fields or at any job - one is taken and one is left. We could imagine the scene of a couple that wakes up one morning and sets about the tasks of the day, never knowing that on that day a heart

attack would change everything - we have sadly seen it played out too often - was that one ready? A thief is coming in the night - does the home owner sleep through it?

Advent call us to prepare for the coming of the Lord - to be awake and ready. We get so caught up in our Christmas preparations that often it seems that even in the church all we are really preparing for is the celebrations of the anniversary of the birth of Jesus. But it is more than that. We live between the comings of Christ. Christ came, born in Bethlehem. But Christ will come again. That is the promise and the warning which shapes this call to watchfulness. --- Are you ready?

In some ways I hate this text and the question it forces on us. It feels so much like a scare tactic. ARE YOU READY? Do you have your house in order? Watch out - it could happen at any minute!

It puts me in mind of one of my favorite stories. There was a young pastor that had recently entered the ministry and was trying hard to develop a style of preaching without notes that he liked. He had worked hard on preparing his Advent sermon and the time had come for delivering it. But shortly after he began he found that he had forgotten what he was planning to say. He knew that the main point was to emphasize that Christ was coming soon, so he decided that he would just repeat that line in hopes that it would stir his memory. So he said; "He is coming so." But it didn't help - so he tried again; "He is coming soon!!!" Nothing. So after a dramatic pause he tried again - but this time he put his all into it, slapping his hands down on the pulpit and really leaning into it. "HE IS COMING SOON!!!" Unfortunately, the pulpit was old and a little weak in some spots and it broke free and the pastor was thrown forward into the front pew right into the lap of one of the members sitting there. The pastor picked himself up and apologized to the woman. But she simply said: "Oh, it's my own fault. I should have moved back right away. After all you told us three times that you were coming soon,"

Are you ready for the coming of Christ? That is the advent question. And it is a tough one to answer. What do you do to get ready? Will you ever really be ready? My guess is that most of us will always feel a little unprepared.

It made me think of the warnings that accompanied the approach of winter every year. Are you ready? Do you have your winter survival kit in the car? Frankly, the answer was no for me personally - I was lulled into complacency by the nice weather of early November. In North Dakota, a guy should know better. And so should the Children of God. By faith we know our Savior comes. Will we be awake and prepared. But a winter survival kit in the car is easy. We should all know what to put in that kit. It is cheap and easy to pack together - no great difficulty to stow it away in the car and you can say with confidence - "Yes, I'm ready!" But faith - how do we prepare - how do we keep awake? Can we ever say that we are ready with the same confidence when it comes to the coming of Christ?

It seems to me that the answer should be a resounding YES. After all, our survival kit has already been packed and given to us. Like a father who, out of concern and love for his child, prepares a winter survival kit for his child God has prepared our survival kit for the day of His coming. On the cross everything was made ready and given to us as a gift. All we need to do is accept the gift and make sure that we do not run off, leaving the gift behind as something that is not important anymore.

Are we ready? Have we learned to walk with Christ? If we have the gift and we keep awake by walking in the light of Christ, then it seems to me that we have nothing to fear. When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he talked about the day of the coming of Christ. Yes, he calls us to be ready and to live a life that is 'in Christ'. But what is so beautiful about the text is the language that tells us that the day of the Lord will be like the coming of the dawn.

So often when I hear talk about Christ's coming, it is presented as though it is something to fear. Images of death, guilt and sinfulness leading to the awesome judgement throne of a righteous God come to mind. Perhaps we very naturally think of it in terms of the days of our life having come to an end and the eternal night about to fall. But Paul's image is reversed. It is not the day that is about over - nor is it the darkness and evil of night that approaches. Rather, it is the night that is about over and the dawn will come with a glorious day ahead.

Are you sleeping yet? Wake up - walk with Christ - for the glorious day of the Lord is coming.

AMEN