

“Keep Awake!”
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Well, here we are again. Back around to Advent, like every year, thinking about and preparing for Jesus to come into the world. A few things are different this year—like the start of this interim ministry and maybe that the first Sunday this year is in December rather than November. But most things are the same—the same advent wreath with similar themes of hope, peace, joy, and love with the same Christ candle in the middle. And while the lines might be different each year, there’s the children’s pageant with the same tilted halos and baby Jesus in the manger.

The carols are the same—Christmas carols now in the stores and on the radio, but Advent themed songs for now in church as we prepare our hearts—just like every year—for the coming of sweet baby Jesus.

But before we get too comfortable in the routine of Advent, we are warned by Paul in Romans: “Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep.” Now—right now. Wake up! Paul is writing to the Romans; and in the previous chapters, he has been reflecting on the new life we have in Jesus Christ: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

And then Paul writes about love—that all commandments are summed up in, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This new life in Christ and this new commandment of love are the ways Paul is urging his readers to keep alert. He calls his readers to step away from those types of things that dull our minds: reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy. Instead, he writes, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Keep awake! “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

In our Gospel lesson, we are reminded to keep alert as well. Just think, reflects the author of the Gospel of Matthew, of those people who before the flood were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day Noah entered the ark. Now eating and drinking and being married are, for me, good things. Most of us just finished plenty of eating and drinking with our families over Thanksgiving dinner.

But a few years ago at a presentation in Madison, Dr. Thomas Long, the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, changed my mind about this passage. Instead of being full of joy at eating, drinking, and having weddings, he said the actual words for these actions in Greek. Eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage in English might elicit a, “Cheers” or even a “hip hip hooray!” from us. But in Greek, especially when declared aloud in a mocking, low gruff voice of one of the best preachers on the planet, I am convinced otherwise. In a bellowing voice, he said, they were “trogontes and pinontes and gamountes and gamizontes.”

In other words, they were blah blah blah. In other words, they were just going along with their ordinary, mundane lives, not paying attention. Chewing and swallowing and bothering to get married. “Trogontes and pinontes and gamountes and gamizontes.” Hardly a call for cheers when you hear it said like that

But instead of gumping along through life, we are called to keep alert. There are warnings throughout Scripture to keep alert—to keep awake. I think it's less of a warning than it is a reminder to pay attention. After all, you never know when God might show up. So keep awake, for "now is the moment for you to wake from sleep."

That is the significance of Advent. We spend a few weeks at the beginning of the church year, which begins today with this first Sunday of Advent, reminding ourselves to keep alert for the presence of Jesus. Yes, in a few weeks we will watch the pageant, we will gather for Christmas eve, we will hear the stories of a baby born in a barn cave and laid in a manger—a baby who changes everything. And yes, in the face of that baby, we see the face of God. And written on the life of that baby is the story of God's grace.

But 2000 years ago in Bethlehem was not Jesus' only arrival in our lives. Jesus arrives every day. We must keep awake to see his presence and work.

The United Church of Christ has a daily devotional that follows the lectionary and which gets posted online. The question Quinn Caldwell, the pastor and teacher at Plymouth Congregational Church in Syracuse, New York, reflected on this past week is how helpful it would be if the denomination had a place to make a pilgrimage to—a location for God to which we could journey, like in the Isaiah passage from the advent candle reading.

"Where is God's home?" Readers were invited to respond via facebook. Almost 100 answers were given on the topic. Most were far more philosophical than geographical. Answers like... in our hearts, in retreat gatherings, at special events... all pointed to current ways God is at work and noticed in the world.

This got me to thinking about God's home as well. I wonder if God's home is hope. The Isaiah passage that was read during the lighting of the Hope candle speaks to the hope of peace—that weapons of war would be turned into tools for farming. (<http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/pilgrimage.html>) God arrives when we have hope that our nations will stop one-upping each other and instead we would work together for peace, to help feed those who are hungry, to till the land and help it to bring forth food.

Jesus arrives in hope on a day like today when this congregation enters an interim journey—one which I hope will bear the fruit of deeper faith and trust in God, more love and grace and forgiveness toward one another, and an even greater reaching out to those who are in need—physically or spiritually. And on this interim journey, I also hope it will bear the fruit of you having a called and installed pastor again.

We are reminded of God's hope in congregational meetings when we vote on those officers we hope will continue to lead the congregation in its faith journey. We are reminded of God's hope when ruling elders and deacons are chosen because they help "strengthen and nurture its faith and life." We are reminded of hope and gratitude when we trust God and one another to choose those who, as our Presbyterian Book of Order reflects, "have brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion and sound judgment" and that "they share in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed."

We are reminded of hope this Advent by the prophets who longed for God's people to be gathered together and experience God's healing and power and love.

We are reminded of hope this Advent by this table, where we remember and give thanks for God sending Jesus into the world to be a bridge for us to God. We acknowledge the hope that one day, we will all be gathered together with God in the kingdom of God's love and hope.

We are reminded of hope in Advent in the breaking of the bread. John Buchanan, a recently retired Presbyterian minister, writes of a story he heard one summer while he was serving a tiny church in Scotland. He reflected on this story of communion in the October 2, 2013, edition of the *Christian Century*.

The pastor from the next village told him how, "He was an infantryman in the British army in World War II and ended up in a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland. The conditions were dreadful. There was no heat, and prisoners were given a single bowl of thin soup and a small crust of bread daily. Men were starving, sick, filthy, and desperate. Suicide was a very real option. All one had to do was run toward the perimeter of the camp and leap against the barbed wire fence. Guards would immediately shoot and kill anyone trying to escape."

"In the middle of the night [this pastor] walked the perimeter and sat down beside a fence to think about going through with it. He heard movement in the darkness from the other side of the fence. It was a Polish farmer. The man thrust his hand through the barbed wire and handed my friend half of a potato. In heavily accented English he said, 'The Body of Christ.'" ("Shared Meal" by John M Buchanan, *Christian Century*, October 2, 2013.)

Hope keeps us awake and alert to God's presence in our lives. Keep awake! This week, "Keep awake!" Pay attention to those times when God is revealing Jesus to you. Let us walk in the light of hope, alert to God's action in the world. Thanks be to God!