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Be alert, stay awake this new year

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 1, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

When we listen to this Gospel message today and the other Scripture lessons, it will be helpful if we remember the context within which these lessons are proclaimed to us. We're beginning a new year. We're used to new years. With our calendar year, we celebrate the beginning of every new year, or we know how we have a fiscal year, and we know how we have an academic year, but we also have a church year, a liturgical year.

Today is the beginning of this new year. It begins with the preparation for the birth of Jesus, but then our new year goes on through the early life of Jesus, as He grows up and begins His public life, begins to go out and teach and reach out to the poor, heal the sick, comfort the sorrowing and so on.

We listen to stories about that whole public life of Jesus, to events that happen within it, to the words that Jesus proclaims as we go through the year. We enter into the sufferings of Jesus. We enter into His death and resurrection, today of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and then we go on for the rest of the year trying to listen to how we are to respond to this extraordinary coming of God into our midst in Jesus. That's our liturgical year, and we have just completed one. Now we're beginning a new one.

First Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:33-37

Full text of the readings [1]

It begins, as I mentioned, with the season of Advent. Now Advent means, "A coming or arrival." It means that something new is about to happen. So that's the season in which we are right now, but there are also other comings. The Gospel alluded to the final coming of Jesus, and we have to be alert and awake for each of these as the Gospel warned us, but there is another way in which Jesus comes that is perhaps even more important. Remember how, at one point toward the end of the Gospel, Jesus says, "I will be with you until the end of the world."

In our Eucharistic prayer, the words reassure us: "Jesus now lives with you, God, in heaven, but Jesus is also here on earth among us." So Jesus is coming now into our lives. When we hear in the Gospel, "Stay awake. Be alert," I think perhaps this is the most important part of our lives, where we have to stay alert and be awake for those moments when Jesus breaks into our lives, where His ideas, His thoughts begin to enter into our minds and our hearts. We have to be ready for that. I think, in fact, this readiness, if we are prepared for the moment when Jesus will come, if we take the time to be quiet and listen, then we will be even more ready to celebrate that first coming when Jesus was born into this world.

If we enter into a spirit of prayer and alertness or readiness, then the words that Isaiah proclaimed in our first lesson as a prayer, "O, God, that you would rend the heavens and come down, the mountains would quake at your presence," we would understand if we were alert, that that has happened, that God has rended the heavens and has come down in a way that is truly astonishing, not as a powerful king or ruler, not as someone overflowing with wealth, but as a tiny infant, born in a cave in the tiny town of Bethlehem.

If we are ready to listen to God speaking to us now, be alert to God living within us, here on earth among us, we'll have a much deeper appreciation for the mystery of what we call the Incarnation, where God takes flesh, becomes one of us, enters into human history. As that happens, everything is changed. Jesus, Son of God, has now become one of us. Again, the Eucharistic prayer says, "Yes, God, You are holy. You are kind to us and to

all. For this, we thank You. We thank You above all for Your Son, Jesus Christ. You sent him into this world because people have turned away from You and no longer loved one another."

Jesus opened our eyes and our hearts to understand that we -- and we're talking here about all the people of the earth -- are brothers and sisters, one human family, and You are the one God of us all. As Jesus enters into human history, everything is changed. We become more clearly, as God intended, one human family, one God who is the God of us all. If we saw the Incarnation in this way and understood it through our prayer, that would affect all our lives, our relationships with one another and the whole human family.

So it's important for us to be alert, to listen, to hear God speaking to us now. I think also because as we hear God is coming at the end of time, we think of judgment. We think perhaps we could be the ones cast into darkness where there is gnashing of teeth and suffering forever. Yet, again, if we were alert to Jesus coming to us at this moment and any moment, perhaps our prayer would be more like that of Isaiah.

"You, O, God, are our God from the beginning. Yes, we have strayed from Your ways. Our hearts have become hard so we do not fear You. Return for the sake of Your servants. For too long we have become like those You do not rule, like those who do not bear your name." We would be ready to open our hearts, confessing our failures so that God can again rend the heavens, come down, heal us and change us. So again, it's so important to be alert, to be awake as God enters into our hearts right now.

Not only will we have a deeper appreciation of what God has done in the Incarnation, Jesus coming into human history, but also, we will be ready whenever God comes again at that final moment when all of creation is transformed into the full Reign of God. Then also, it reminds us that Jesus, in that parable, not only urged the gatekeepers to be watching, but also all the servants, each doing their own work. We, too, must continue to work according to the ways of Jesus in this in-between time after His first coming, before the final coming.

Jesus asks us to be united with Him in His efforts to transform this world into as close an image of the Reign of God as possible by seeing Jesus in the hungry, the homeless, the immigrant, the outcast, seeing Jesus in everyone who is in need. If we are alert, we will understand that it is our work to do what Jesus did, to reach out, to heal, to bring the fullness of justice and love everywhere we can. Yes, this is so important. Be awake, be alert, but continue to work to transform our world.

Each of us can think of the ways in which we can make our world a better place, not only by reaching out to the poor and those in need immediately, but also by trying to transform the structures of our economy, the structures of our relationships in our individual lives and our lives within our nation, so that we work to bring peace into our world. This is what can happen if we stay alert. Then we will know that Jesus is living within us right now. He's guiding us and we will continue to work.

As we do that, then I think we can hear with great confidence and joy what Paul says to us in our second lesson today. "I give thanks," Paul says, "constantly to God for you and for the grace of God given to you in Christ Jesus." Yes, we ourselves can be thankful for the grace God has given to us. Then Paul also said, "You do not lack any spiritual gift. You await the glorious coming of Christ Jesus, our Lord. What confidence that can give us. Jesus will keep you steadfast to the end. You will be without reproach on the day of the coming of our Lord, Jesus." A faithful God will not fail you after calling you to this communion with Jesus, His Son. Be alert. Stay awake. Work and these words will be true of each one of us.

[Homily given at St. Anne, Frankfort, Mich.]

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