

Advent I B December 3, 2017

**Isaiah 64: 1-9; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; I Corinthians 1: 3-9;
Mark 13: 24-37**

St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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**O, COME, O COME, EMMANUEL; COME ON GLORIOUS
CLOUDS DESCENDING INTO OUR EXPECTANT HEARTS
PREPARED FOR THEE. AMEN.**

**“Beware, keep alert... keep awake-for you do not know when
the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at
midnight, or at cockcrow, or else he may find you asleep when
suddenly he comes. And what I say to you, I say to ALL: Keep
awake.”**

**One summer night, while living in the Back Bay of Boston, my
husband, Tom, came home late, exhausted from a lengthy**

business trip. Our youngest daughter, Grayson, and I were asleep; all seemed well. Some hours later, however, that illusion of tranquility was shattered by the piercing shriek of the downstairs burglar alarm. Scrambling up, dazed from disrupted dreams, we raced to Grayson. Deep asleep as only a teenager can be, her second-story room in shambles, she was oblivious to the midnight intrusion, not comprehending our total vulnerability to the will of the thief in the night.

Seemingly the robber had thumbed his nose at Grayson, casually casting costume jewelry by her sleeping body, while snatching her treasured family heirlooms hidden under the bed. The thief hadn't phoned ahead to see if Friday at 2:00 A.M. was convenient, or would Saturday be better. Sudden. Swift. Without warning. Stripped of our daytime armor, the

thief found us blissfully unaware, jolted into the frightening reality our carefully crafted insularity did not prevent.

And Jesus warned, “In those days (the last days)...the sun will be darkened...the moon will not give its light...the stars will be falling from Heaven...you do not know when the master will come...like a thief in the night.” These persistent Advent metaphors are profoundly disturbing, troubling because they take us where we don’t want to go. Penetrating and intense, apocalyptic images must force us deeper, deeper than just ignoring the lull of mall madness and tacky tinsel; deeper than exchanging the “extracurricular we” for the “essential we”; deeper even than making a room for Jesus in the Inn of our hearts. We protest. Why isn’t it deep enough to forsake the secularity of Christmas for the holiness of it? The reason is as

mysterious as the reality Jesus is always coming, not just to Bethlehem, not just at Christmas, but always coming, suddenly, without warning. Advent 2017: Be awake! Be alert!

Look around at the current chaos that is our country and God's world! The dominant powers and principalities, the dark forces circling dangerously close! Is Jesus' coming as deep as that, and is Christ Power up to the task?

Each year New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art displays a soaring, majestic Christmas tree bedecked with glorious angels. The tree stands watch over a small, but exquisite eighteenth century Neapolitan Nativity scene. The beloved figures are all present: the Holy Family, the shepherds, the Magi, the lowing herd. There is, in this familiar setting, however, one startling difference. For its backdrop,

THIS Nativity has a gigantic mural of the Roman Empire, at first glance, carelessly dwarfing the Nativity. Yet, a second look reveals the mural's decaying ruins, Rome's crumbling columns and temple, all pointing to the new reality in the context of Bethlehem: Rome, a mighty, dominant culture, fallen, rendered powerless. Awake, Sleepers! Be alert! It IS as deep as that!

Advent awakens us to present time mixed with end time, life with death, alerts us to the surrounding darkness, yet there is living hope in the center-radiating light as glowing as a tiny babe in the womb, but alive! As delicate as Baby Jesus in the manger, but alive! As vulnerable as a Man on the Cross but as alive as the One who rolled back the tombstone. ALIVE! It is Isaiah's promise: "From ages past no one has heard, no ear

has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.” Shall we wait on suspenseful tiptoe for the true God?

What will Jesus find when he does come? Unlike our Boston thief, Jesus isn't interested in accumulations-be they transitory objects or our daytime slick presentations for life's stage; Jesus is disinterested in visible-to-the-world efforts, only embracing visible-to-God ones. Seeking the heirlooms of our souls, valuable enough to die for them, Jesus wants our personal security systems dismantled, so Jesus lovingly waits until we least expect his coming...the moments we most need for him to break through our pitiable, crushed defenses ...sudden illness or death, crashing finances, broken childhood memories, pervasive loneliness, or challenging transitions

with love. Don't be surprised says God; it is these events that can serve divine purpose, not to punish, but to bless by once more elevating our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies to his Coming. "Yes, O Lord, you are our Father," says Isaiah, "we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." "Restore us, O God of hosts;" says the Psalmist, "show us the light of your countenance and we shall be saved...give us life that we might call upon your Name."

The Prophet Isaiah's language is razor-sharp: "Oh, God, that you would tear open the Heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." Such apocalyptic words sound like they are trying to frighten us to death, but truly, they are intended to awaken us to life. Be alert! Be conscious of the complete picture of God in Salvation History,

shout the prophets! The full Eucharistic proclamation: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ WILL come again...and again and again.

Look around. There ARE signs, not signs that tell WHEN he will come, but signs that tell us he WILL come, and world history, the social order, as we know it, will cease. Can we determine the time? Jesus said, “No one but the Father knows the time.” What you and I CAN determine, however, is that we are given THIS time, our ONLY time, to live sober and righteous lives, waiting for the One whose “words will not pass away”, who continuously brings Light incomprehensible into our human darkness. Whatever God chooses, whenever God chooses, however God chooses, Jesus WILL come. Mountains will be brought low and valleys will be exalted; streams of living

water will refresh the parched land. That promise should be enough to keep us poised on the very pinnacle of Advent expectation. Be awake! Be alert to that for which we pray: O, COME, O COME, EMMANUEL; COME ON GLORIOUS CLOUDS DESCENDING INTO EXPECTANT HEARTS PREPARED FOR YOU. AMEN.