

November 30, 2008

First Sunday of Advent, Year B (Mark 13:24-37)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector

“Keep awake!”

Really? Is he serious? As a new mother still experiencing sleep-deprivation, these are challenging words. My life currently is about survival – I try to just make it through each day as I continue to adjust to this major change. I wake-up, get myself and Madelynne ready for the day, fix breakfast, feed Madelynne, pack a lunch, grab the bottles for daycare, battle traffic, settle her into daycare, rush to work, and then it is off to meetings, returning phone calls and e-mails and setting about the work for that day. Before I know it, it's time to pick-up Madelynne from daycare, drive home, unload and clean the used bottles, put in a load of laundry, eat dinner, feed Madelynne, wash the dishes, give Madelynne a bath, and get us all ready to do it all over again tomorrow. Every minute is packed with tasks, responsibilities, and all the routines of living with a six-month old. I am usually ready to collapse hours before my tasks are done. “Keep awake” – sure, right.

My life is not unique. I am sure this rhythm of constant motion: meetings, tasks, and to do lists are probably familiar whether you care for a child or an aging relative or are mired with the responsibilities that come with being a corporate executive. We all have our routines and responsibilities, the mundane tasks and things which keep us busy and moving. Routine in and of itself is not a bad thing, the hazard is that we can become lulled into a mindless engagement with our lives, sleep-walking through the rhythm and routine of our lives. We get that glazed-eye look and face our lives with an almost indifference, a submission to the innocuous routine. In our haze we neglect to engage in real relationship with God, and the purpose of our being shifts away from honoring God. Sleep-walking through life keeps us from watching and listening for what is of ultimate worth, keeps us from our ability to respond to another person, compromises our ability to really love. The mundane can lull us into a false reality of what is important and lead us away from centering our reality on God.

Advent invites us for a time to look anew at how our lives today are tied to God's presence with God's people. This is no time for sleep-walking. We have to shake off our slumber and move beyond ourselves as we ponder the coming of the Christ child. Over the next four weeks of Advent, as we prepare for the birth of Christ, we have an opportunity to re-connect, to renew our relationship with God. We have four weeks set aside to consider how our lives reflect the promise of God in the world. Four weeks to wonder over the miracle that God is drawing near to us and what that nearness means for us.

This week I was here on Tuesday night for Covenant Community's Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless. Throughout the day I could smell the food cooking in the kitchen and I watched as people brought more and more dishes with intoxicating scents wafting from them. In my work here at the church I encounter the homeless on a weekly basis – approaching me on the street as we walk to pick-up some lunch or coming to the door asking for assistance. Tuesday night was different. I caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, right here at All Saints' down in Ellis Hall.

The community came together to feed and care for over 463 of its homeless members. Families came and worked together: while members from the community served the meal buffet style, children seated people at tables and served them dessert, and everyone took a turn at clearing off the trash. The people outside who were waiting in a line that stretched around the block encouraged an older man with a bad leg to move to the front so he wouldn't have to stand in the cold. That night something different was happening - that night there was a different quality, a different spirit in our interactions with one another. That night each person was seen for whom they were: a beloved child of God. That night I saw the social lines blur as we gathered around tables and shared a banquet feast celebrating all together. That night the Kingdom of God was here among us.

Keep Watch! These moments are all around us – moments where God is breaking in and transforming our entrenched realities into something new and life-giving. God is drawing near and transforming our world. In this Advent season, keep alert, my friends, awaken your senses and prepare yourselves. Our lives will be renewed and transformed as God draws near, but if we continue in our sleepy states, if we continue trudging through our days, we will miss it. We will miss opportunities to be in service to God's kingdom; we will miss opportunities for our own renewal and transformation. While the television ads and newspaper fliers scream at us to shop, shop, shop lulling us into a distracted state of frenzy, instead this Advent season let us give ourselves the gift of time, intentional time set apart to prepare for Christmas, to prepare for the coming of Christ. Set aside space and time to spend in quiet contemplation and prayer with God. We must be ready to respond, we must keep awake or we will miss it, we will miss God drawing near and coming into our lives. Keep Awake and watch for God.