

We have arrived at the season of advent. As one colleague of mine put it, we can finally stop waiting for the waiting to begin. Because that is what this season is all about. Waiting, anticipating, preparing, making ready, keeping vigil, keeping alert, keeping awake. You could say that for this first Sunday of Advent the themes in our texts today serve as a call—a plea even—for God to take action, to tear open the sky and come, and at the same time as a plea for all of God’s people to stay awake, to keep alert, for we don’t know the day nor hour of that action. This wake-up call, this challenge to awake and arise, this always reminds me of my brother, who for me symbolizes the perfection of the snooze button.

Some of you have met my brother, Nathan. He played soprano sax here for my installation, he has actually worked with Ken Medema at least once, through their mutual friend David Burroughs and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. For most of his life, Nathan has not been what you would call a morning person. As far as I’m aware, he coined the phrase getting up at the crack of noon, and if someone else mentions something they have to do at 6 am, he usually says, “wait, there’s a six o’clock AM, too?” He’s a jazz musician, so late nights for him are just part of the deal, but that’s kind of the chicken and egg question for him: did his vocation make him a night-owl, or was it inevitably the other way around?

But here’s the particular story I think of when I hear these advent themes: it was a summer that we were both home from college, each with a pretty good summer job. Our family had moved, and unlike the house we lived in when we were both in high school, we shared a room that summer. I was working somewhere where I had to be clean, tidy and relatively well dressed. Nathan was working for a moving and storage company, where the only real requirement of his dress code was steel-toed boots. So the alarm would ring in our room, and normally he’d hit the snooze button. It was automatic. Pavlovian, even. And five minutes later, it would ring again, and again he hit the snooze. At this second alarm, I’d get up, head to the shower, where

inevitably I'd hear it go off again. And again, once I was out of my shower. Finally, showered, shaved and totally ready to go, I'd come back into the room and I would rouse him awake, either with a shout or a shake or both. And he'd roll out of bed, pull on his boots and off we'd go to our respective jobs. I have never known anyone before or since that used the snooze button with such finesse, and who was nevertheless unaffected by the alarm itself. More of an annoyance than a challenge, his wake-up call eventually worked, though not completely as designed.

The people of Israel, you might say, showed similar mastery of the snooze button. Throughout their history, the people of Israel were in a near constant state of falling out of favor with God, and coming back to God. God, who is described as "slow to anger," nonetheless arrives from time to time at the end of the divine fuse, and God's anger, as we heard this morning, is kindled against the people. At various times in various ways, God tried to correct the people's behavior—sometimes gently and sometimes not-so-gently. God sent prophets who would speak God's word to the people. Sometimes, they listened, often they did not. Even when they did, the effect didn't always last. It's like they heard the wake-up call, and then they hit the snooze button. It was automatic. Pavlovian even.

But God continued to send more and more prophets, faithful people who, often in spite of themselves, would speak a word of truth to the people, especially to the leaders of the people. Sometimes it was a gentle reminder to the people—wake up, you've been putting off what you need to do, not executing the kindness God expects, delaying the justice God demands. Other times, the prophets shouted out to God—why aren't you showing up, God, why *don't* you rip open the skies and come set these people straight God? In this sense, the prophets played two different but overlapping roles: to cry out to God in the face of God's seeming inaction, and to wake the people up, to call them back to who they were meant to be, to remind them of their better selves, to call on them to be these better versions of themselves, and, at times, to offer visions of the consequences that would be theirs if they did not. Elsewhere, for example, the prophet Isaiah says, Wake up, people; God is about to do

a new thing among you. The day of the Lord is coming and it will be like nothing you've ever known before. Don't sleep, he says, as you await the one unlike any other our eyes have seen or our ears perceived throughout all ages past.

Other times, like in this morning's passage, Isaiah's message is more like this: "don't stay angry with us God, for despite our flaws, despite our sin we **are** waiting for you. We await the day of God's justice and peace, when God will tear open the sky and come. We await the one who is to come—Christ, Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

We are waiting for God, again this advent season. But at the same time, we know that God in Christ Jesus has already come to live among us. He has already taken on human form to become one of us. The Word of God has already been made flesh in order to dwell among us. You see, the Christ who is to come, the one for whom we wait is the same Christ who once lived among us on earth, and who is known throughout the gospel story as the friend and healer of those in need. And so our waiting, our anticipation, our preparation, our keeping alert and awake, this is nothing less than living in hope, expecting Christ's return. This waiting, this preparing, this remaining awake and alert, this is central to our Christian faith.

We're not simply re-hashing history, or re-enacting this particular event. We are not **PRETENDING** to wait for Jesus to come. We do not keep awake and alert as part of a charade, part of a grand pantomime of the faith. No, it is by this waiting, but these preparations, by our keeping awake and alert to whatever is up to in the world around us that that we insist that there is more to the human story and more, too, to God's own story than that which has been experienced already.

As people of faith, as people who live lives convinced that Christ has come to live among us, that he has given us what we need to live right now and the promise of everlasting life with him in the future, this hope, this expectation, this should lead us to speak up for justice in a world Christ is continually reconciling to himself. We are called to enter into that reconciliation, as way of bearing witness to the one who is

coming among us again. We don't know how or when Christ might show up once again in right in our midst, and so we keep his work alive as we wait. We stay awake. We remain alert to the possibility, we speak of what it means that Christ has come and that he is with us now and that he will come again. We live in hope, and we look early, frequently, and openly for signs of Christ's hope all around us.

The final scene in Spike Lee's classic movie "School Daze" has the main character running around shouting "WAKE UP!" The back story has to do with all the things this character thinks people need to pay attention to: systematic and internalized racism in the United States, black on black violence in American cities, the haves continually separated from the have-nots—things we are all too aware of still, 30 years or so after this movie came out. This character's literal wake-up call rouses first all the others on the college campus where the movie takes place. But soon, his cries of "wake up" go beyond that, and people from the neighboring town are being woken up, and assembling as if to receive further instructions, further prophecy perhaps. Finally, the character turns his face fully to the camera, addressing his words unequivocally and unapologetically to the audience, to the people beyond that curtain separating art and fiction from reality. Wake up, he says to all who will listen, all who have ears to hear. Wake up, pay attention to things going on around you. Be engaged in this world, be an agent of hope, be an instrument of peace, be a vessel of joy, be a sign of God's love.

My sisters and brothers, stay alert. Keep awake.

We don't know the day or the time or the manner in which Christ will be revealed.

But Christ is coming. Jesus is coming. Emmanuel is coming. God-with-us is coming.

Amen.