**Stay Awake!**

When I was a Seminary student in my first preaching class my professor, a woman named Barbara Lundblad, suggested a simple exercise.

Every week when your are preparing to preach, she said. Write the text for the day down and carry it everywhere.

The idea is that preaching is the most effective when it is in conversation with what is happening during the rest of the week.

Going to visit someone in the hospital? Pull out the text and read it to yourself in the waiting room, see how it sounds in an stressful and anxious atmosphere.

At an interfaith meeting? Take it out and read it, imagine how it might sound to someone of another faith.

Watching the news? Take that text, and read it, and wonder what it says about our world.

It sounds odd, but it really works well. The same words, sound so different when I read them in different places. So this practice has become important to me as I prepare. Traveling with the text as I go through my week to see where the connections are.

I must confess though, I had a pretty strange experience this week.

I had to go to the Apple Store down at the South Shore mall to get a problem with my phone diagnosed. I made a 2:15 appointment at the Genius Bar, but I got there a few minutes early. So I sat down on one of the armchairs in the middle of the mall, and took out the text from Mark.

And I started to read to myself:

 ‘But in those days, after that suffering,

 the sun will be darkened,

 and the moon will not give its light,

 and the stars will be falling from heaven,

    and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

And as I read I suddenly became aware of other familiar words, echoing through the Mall. Rather loudly.

 (sing) “Its the most wonderful time of the year. With the kids jingle belling. And everyone telling you be of good cheeeeeer”

This Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. And every year, the assigned lectionary text for the First Sunday of Advent is about the End of the World.

Like this text from Mark, where Jesus is telling his disciples that soon, very soon, everything that they have known will pass away, even the sun and moon and stars will vanish. Or Isaiah, the ancient prophet who prayed to God: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that mountains would shake!”

Year after year, in church’s around the world we begin this season, this season of preparing of Christ’s birth, and preparing our hearts to celebrate Christmas, we begin it all by reading about the End of the World.

And that might seem a bit odd. It did to me. Until I was sitting in that shopping mall and I started thinking about this past year.

About the violence that grows daily around the world.

And the violence that persists in our own cities.

I thought about the terror that gripped Paris.

I thought about the wars that seem to never end.

The poverty we cannot quite solve.

The mire of racism we cannot seem to escape.

And slowly I found that the most comforting idea in the world to me was the thought that God might tear open the heavens and come down. That the old things, the things that we have come to expect, might pass away, and something new would come to take its place.

There is a popular trend in Church’s around this time of year to do what is called a Blue Christmas service. These services are a recognition that for many people the holidays are not a source of joy, but a reminder of grief. It might be the First Christmas without a parent, or the first New Years since a divorce.

The Blue Christmas Service was created to counterbalance a season where everything is Merry and Bright, even though many of us may not be feeling that way.

During my time at my last Congregation we had a change of Senior Ministers. And when Mary Luti, our new pastor arrived, she was not a big fan of the idea of having this Blue Christmas service.

That’s what Advent is for. She said.

Advent is a season for our longing. It is a season where our faint hope burns with the vulnerability of a single candle flame against the cold, dark, night.

It is a season of waiting for God’s greatest promises to come true. Of hoping for joy and peace and love, while our lives, and our world, might make that hope seem foolish.

If all you had was the music at the mall, you might easily make the mistake that the season leading up to Christmas is only for happy people. Only for the cheery and the jolly. Only for everyone who has it all together, who can pull off an effortless party, and give the perfect gift.

But thankfully we have more than the music at the mall. We have the gospel. We have advent. We have this season that bears witness to our longings. A season when we can say “I am not alright” “I am having a hard time”

Because part of the promise of advent. Part of the gift of this season is not just the new things that are coming. It is that what is old, is passing away.

That is why, for hundreds and thousands of years, Christians around the world have begun their preparation for Christmas, by reading about the end. By reading these vivid and imaginative accounts of the old tiresome things passing away.

It is because in order to believe, to really believe, that God was coming to set us free.

In order to really believe that the gift of God’s love could come into this mess of a world wrapped in something as vulnerable as an infant.

In order to believe that God is with us.

We have to also believe that wars will end.

That addictions will be overcome.

That long struggles will not last forever.

That death won’t have the last word.

That racism cannot endure.

That all of it, all the things that wear us out,

that take us to the end of our ropes,

that drive us to the brink, will end.

 If you are waiting desperately for that. Then this season is for you. Advent, is for you.

And so the First Candle of Advent is Hope.

And the first Word of Advent is, “keep awake!”

Keep awake, because these old things can’t last.

Keep awake, because God is about to do something extraordinary.

Keep awake, because Christ is coming.

That is our hope on the First Sunday of Advent.

Near to the longest and darkest nights of the year.

It is our hope that right now is flickering, like a single candle in a storm.

I have a colleague named Liz Garrigan-Byerly. She is a minister who specializes in Pastoral Care. One of the best things that I learned from Liz was how she understood the role of a congregation in providing care to individuals.

When someone came to her who was struggling to feel any faith or trust in God. Or who was struggling to hold onto any hope that things might improve. She would say: “Let us hold that hope for you.”

Everyone struggles to feel hopeful sometimes, let this congregation believe what you cannot bring yourself to believe. Let us hope on your behalf.

Let us say to you, we believe that there is life beyond this loss for you. We believe that there is a way when it looks like there is no way. We believe that there are still waters beyond this valley of shadows.

And if you are too deep in the valley, or too lost in the dark to believe it. Thats ok. We will hold that hope for you.

I love that image. I don’t know this for sure, but I am willing to bet, that right now in this room there are people who are filled with hope and faith in the future, and there are people who are struggling to believe that God’s love is coming for them.

And this candle, burning here, this candle of hope, is for everyone of you.

Whether you are feeling hopeful or not. We are holding hope for you.

We are hoping, and expecting, that the hard things are passing away.

We are praying with Isaiah, for God to come down. To shake up the world. To act boldly. To set the captive free. Heal the sick. And bring peace.

We are hoping. We are waiting. We are longing.

That is what this season is for.

And Christ’s instruction is simply this: Stay awake!

Stay awake, because you never know when God’s love might be born in some unexpected place.

Stay awake, because you never know if something as needy as a newborn might be the answer to your prayers.

Stay awake, because you never know when an angel might send you on a journey. Or a new star might entice your toward a far of land.

Stay awake, because Advent is that it won’t leave us in the dark. These candles will grow brighter. Christ will draw nearer and nearer still. Until one night, before too long, we will be back in this room, and it will be awash in glowing candlelight and we will proclaim in once voice what the have always know was true. God is here with us. And God is here to stay.

But for now, we have one candle.

And it shines like a beacon. It bears witness to the hope that we hold.

That what is old will pass away.

That the light of God’s new day is dawning.

So as the light grows.

And as we watch, and wait, and hope, and pray.

As we do the hard work of making God’s love believable in a tragic world.

As we faithfully hold onto hope for those who cannot hold it themselves right now.

As we lean toward the horizon, looking for that first glimpse of dawning light, in the bleakness of a winter’s night.

As we wonder what unexpected way God will break forth in our lives next.

Stay awake.