

THE VERBS OF ADVENT

1) "Watch!"

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November 27, 2016

So it begins—this mysterious season of Advent—this season of watching, turning, seeing and dreaming. It is a season that is familiar to us in so many respects, one that has given birth to rituals and traditions that guide us through the 28 days that lead up to the celebration of Christmas itself. For some, the significance of these rituals and traditions has been lost, swept away by the deluge of the crass and the commercial. While a semblance of these rituals may remain, their meaning is no longer clear.

For others, however, Advent is a season that serves to remind them of that meaning...a season that invites their conscious choice to reawaken the ritual and to rediscover the meaning hidden within. For them, this is a season of intention, of reflection and yes, a reclamation of the hope that is, in fact, holy.

Frederick Buechner, in his classic little book, "Whistling in the Dark," offer this intriguing glimpse of Advent:

"The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in the darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton.

In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that, for all you can tell, it may be only the sound of silence itself. You hold your breath to listen.

You walk up the steps to the front door. The empty windows at either side of it tell you nothing, or almost nothing. For a second, you catch a whiff in the air of some fragrance that reminds you of a place you've never been and a time you have no words for. You are aware of the beating of your heart.

The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.

The Salvation Army Santa Claus clangs his bell. The sidewalks are so crowded you can hardly move. Exhaust fumes are the chief fragrance in the air, and everybody is as bundled up against any sense of what the fuss is really about as they are bundled up against the wind-chill factor.

But if you concentrate just for an instant, far off in the deeps of you somewhere, you can feel the beating of your heart. For all its madness and lost-ness, not to mention your own, you can hear the world itself holding its breath."

(Frederick Buechner "Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized" Harper & Row (p. 2)

If you listen closely, this Advent season, I believe that you can indeed hear "the world itself holding its breath," watching, waiting, wondering if there is reason for hope in a time of growing animosity and hatred...if there is reason to look for light in the gathering gloom and darkness that seems to enshroud us.

The laundry list of what ails us, of what threatens us and our future, need not be reviewed in itemized detail. Suffice it to say, that not one of us is oblivious to the challenges that we face in this new longer new world of the 21st century. We know, only too well, the litany of the struggles that we face in the form of poverty, injustice, race, religion and culture. We know, only too well, that emotions are running high and that frustrations are growing deep.

But what we struggle to know is if there is reason, in the midst of it all, for hope. What we struggle to know is if there is reason to believe that our current course need not be our sentence...reason to believe that life can be different...that understanding, compassion and love can alter our course and change our future.

If you listen closely, this morning, I believe that you can hear the sound of the world itself holding its breath as it wonders about our future as a planet and where this life, as we know it, is leading us.

The jury, of course, is still out. No one has that answer and yet, Advent reminds us that, in a profound sense, we have, at least, part of the answer. Advent reminds us that we need not consider ourselves to be helpless bystanders in the unfolding drama of life as we know it. For the message of Advent is essentially this: God is at work in our world and we are called to share in the work that God is doing.

Yes, Advent is about waiting and watching and preparing. But these are not to be seen as passive pursuits. These are to be understood as active and proactive choices. So it is that we are focusing our attention in this Advent season upon the verbs that summon are action, the verbs that call forth are involvement and participation in the work that God is already doing. In the course of this Sunday and the next three Sundays to follow, we will be considering four verbs and what they might ask of us: **Watch...Turn...See...and Dream.**

We begin then, with this morning's verb: "Watch!"

As our scripture lessons suggest, our Advent assignment is to watch for the ways in which we see God's initiative taking place in our world. In our lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, the Apostle doesn't mince his words. He suggests to his readers that they know what time it is—it's time, says Paul, to "**wake up!**" "**For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.**" God, Paul is saying, has acted in the coming of Christ and he is simply "telling it like it is" as he implies that some of them have been asleep, oblivious to the ways in which God is at work in the world. It's impossible to watch if you happen to be asleep at the switch.

If you want to watch for the signs of God at work, you have to “wake up.” But some of us prefer our sleep. I’m reminded of the woman who announced to her friends, “Sometimes, I wake up grumpy...but sometimes, I let him sleep in.”

I don’t think that it would be unfair to suggest that, sometimes, in the church, we allow ourselves to be lulled to sleep by the hum-drum rhythm of the everyday routine. And, if we are not careful, we can find ourselves simply going through the motions, sleep-walking, as it were, through our meetings and our gatherings, forgetting about our primary purpose as a people. If we are not careful, we can easily allow our agenda to be defined by the trivial and the mundane rather than by the mission to which we have been called.

There is, as you can sense, an urgency in these words of Paul to the early church. “The night is far gone, the day is near.” It’s time to wake up and watch for the ways in which we can invest ourselves in the ways in which God is at work. There is no time to spare. Today is the day! Now is the time!

In our Gospel lesson from Matthew, we read of his admonition to **“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day the Lord is coming.”** This is, of course, a somewhat mysterious passage that underscores the first century expectation that the present evil age would come to an end as it is replaced by the coming age of righteousness, the coming age of God’s kingdom. It is in this understanding that Jesus challenges his listeners to “keep awake” as they watch and wait for the decisive action of God in history.

Watching then, requires the vigilance of not only “waking up,” but “staying awake” to the ways in which God is at work in our world.

Rowan Williams, the former Arch Bishop of Canterbury, suggests that what is needed is the same approach that can be observed in any good bird watcher. In one sense, birdwatching, appears to be a passive activity, but, in reality, it really isn’t. It may involve sitting and waiting, but it also requires an active looking, a diligent searching for whatever bird you happening to be looking for. Otherwise, the chances are relatively good that you will miss what you are hoping to see.

Given the inclination of news programs and sources to focus primarily upon the stories of violence, scandal and crime, it is important to engage in an active looking and a diligent searching for the ways in which goodness is taking root and justice is coming to flower. It is, I think, especially important to watch for the unexpected moments and the unexpected people that make tangible God’s will and way for our world.

Recently, Susan made me aware of one of those ways as reported on the evening news and Facebook. Perhaps you have the little girl who brought healing to an old man lost in his grief. Here is her story... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWhBYfl67H4> (Video)

While it is, to say the least, a heart-warming story, it is also a reminder that God can use a precocious child to bring about healing and hope in the life of a grieving man. That is the way that God works—often in unexpected ways and in unexpected people. Our job, I think,

is to notice the nuances of God at work, to watch for the indicators that suggest that there is, even in the midst of deep darkness, rays of light that split the darkness and reassure us that, in the words of Paul, “the night is far gone and the day is near.”

If you listen closely, this morning, you can hear the sound of the world itself, holding its breath—wondering if there is reason for hope, wondering if there is reason to believe that the darkness will be overcome and that light will prevail.

If you watch closely, I believe that you will find that there is indeed, reason to believe, reason to hope, reason to join forces with others in following the lead of God’s Spirit as it brings the light of kindness, compassion, love and justice to our weary world.

By the way, don’t forget your binoculars. You just might need them!

Amen!