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Awakenings
Matthew 24:36-44

When Dary and I bought our house in Crestwood, we had to act fast. We'd been searching for a new home for a while, so we knew what we were looking for. A house around the corner had sold before we'd been able to even look at it, so we guessed others would be interested in the property. That means we made an offer on the spot – without the lengthy lists of pros and cons, or the spreadsheets of priorities that usually guide our decision making –or, more accurately, our indecision.

We knew that there was a factory nearby, but that wasn't a deal breaker.

Our first night in our new home, we settled Maddie down to sleep in her new room and collapsed, exhausted in ours... only to be jolted awake by what sounded like a ton of metal rods being dropped from a tall height and crashing onto a concrete floor... and then awake again to hear the horn of a train passing over 50th Street. Did you know that train conductors are required by law to blow their horn three times when crossing any street that's not in a quiet zone? It's true.

Had we done our research, we would have discovered that CMC Steel is one of the last working steel mills in Birmingham proper. To stay profitable, they run shifts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They also play “the yellow rose of Texas” at each shift change over a loudspeaker.

That first night, we lay awake listening to the crashing steel and the trains and thinking – Oh no. What have we done?

Now, anyone who has lived in a big city or near train tracks can tell you that noise like that fades over time because you get used to it. My girls can sleep through anything now, and the only time I notice the crashing of the factory

or the train whistles is when I happen to be awake in the quiet wee hours of the morn, or when someone is staying with us who hasn't yet become accustomed to the noise.

Because we do – become accustomed to the noise. We learn to ignore it. Block it out. After all, the crashing chaos of the world is enough to wear us out, and keep us up at night. If we're going to be able to make it through the day, we've got to focus on the tasks at hand, and block out the noise and look away from the crushing need and the pain and the suffering all around us. I'm not just talking about the factory now, right. I'm talking about how we make it through the day as faithful people in a broken world... to some extent, we become accustomed to the brokenness. It doesn't shock us anymore. We learn to ignore it... or even expect it.

This is precisely what Christ warns us against in the passage today. In speaking about the coming apocalypse that many faithful people believed was imminent at that time, Jesus urges his disciples to stay alert, watching for the inbreaking of God's promised reign.

Advent always begins this way, with both eyes focused not on a little town called Bethlehem, not fixed on the horizon searching for a star, but looking towards the end of time, when Christ comes in glory to make all things new. These apocalyptic visions are meant to give hope to people in crisis, and encourage them to remain faithful despite difficult times. And Matthew's community was beginning to lose hope that Jesus would ever return. So we hear Christ saying – No one knows when the end will come. It will surprise us all, like a thief in the night – so we should remain vigilant, awake, and ready to embrace Christ when he appears.

I don't know about you all, but I am feeling a little weary. The Thanksgiving dishes are not even dried and put away, and yet here we are, in Advent. Christmas tree stands appeared overnight on Friday. The urgency of this busy season pulls at us, with advertisements reminding us that there are only twenty-four shopping days left! Just thirty-one days until a new decade! How do we train our ears and our hearts to block out that noise, so

we can focus on what is truly urgent this season – waking up to God’s work in the world, watching and waiting for Christ’s advent among us?

“The call in Matthew’s Gospel, indeed the call of Advent, is to wake up and pay attention to what is going on around us.”¹ In the text, Jesus describes people in the midst of everyday life, giving several examples of what will happen. Two people at work in a field and two women grinding meal; one will be taken, the other left. These were everyday, ordinary activities. This tells me that it is possible to be going through your daily routine and be completely unaware of the kingdom dawning all around. The chapter that follows this one helps me make sense of this apocalyptic vision and the promise of Christ’s second coming. It’s Matthew 25, where Jesus tells the parable of the foolish bridesmaids, the slave and the talents, and the parable of the sheep and the goats – proclaiming that showing mercy to someone who is hungry, or thirsty, or in prison, is showing mercy to him.

That’s the kind of second coming I can believe in – not a cataclysmic battle between good and evil, but Christ who came to us in the person of Jesus returning to us again and again in ordinary times and places, in the people that we meet, in those whom we love and serve, confounding our expectations and waking us up to the wonder and majesty of the kingdom all around us.

The movie *Awakenings* is based a book by Dr. Oliver Sacks about his experiences working at a hospital in the Bronx. He finds there a group of patients who are mostly catatonic, having survived encephalitis many years prior. He suspects that their condition is akin to an extreme form of Parkinson’s, and so he treats them with an experimental drug intended for Parkinson’s patients – to incredible results. The patients awake from their stupors and learn to speak and move and dance and live and love again. It’s an incredibly hopeful story – men and women coming alive again after many years of coma. But the medicine is not a cure. Sadly, their symptoms

1 “Peace: Are We There Yet?” First Sunday of Advent, Year A, Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/are-we-there-yet/first-sunday-of-advent-year-a-planning-notes/first-sunday-of-advent-year-a-preaching-notes>

return, and the patients eventually lose the mobility and ability they'd regained.

I wonder if we don't have something in common with those folks. We've become so accustomed to the noise that we've learned to hope for little and expect even less. It is as if we are asleep, and it takes a huge crash in the middle of the night to wake us up to God's presence and good work in our lives, and in our world. So how can we stay awake? What medicine might work for us? What will help tune our hearts and minds to recognize Christ in one another, inspiring us to even deeper compassion in the days and weeks ahead?

The Connect group that will continue to meet in December is going to be using a daily Advent devotional called *Straw for the Manger*. Inspired by the gospel of Matthew 25, the devotional uses short verses for reflection and envisions daily acts of kindness and compassion as *straw for the manger* – preparing our hearts to see and recognize and welcome Christ when he comes. If you want to join us, you're welcome to – or if you'd like to work through the devotional on your own, there are copies in the narthex. Pick one up on your way to Matthews' Hall for our chili lunch.

My prayer for us this Advent is that we will be able to wake up – not thanks to a crash or a horn in the night, but because we have practiced paying attention, trusting that Christ who came to be with us meets us still.