

Christie and I were at a funeral reception not long ago. Christie was sitting on a sofa next to a 94 year old man named Uncle Boo whose wonderful 101 year old sister had just died. Uncle Boo was having a grand old time, having a drink, eating his cheese and cracker, sitting in his niece’s beautiful living room.

At 94, a little bit of confusion had set in, but, still, there he was. After an hour or so, Uncle Boo turned to Christie and said, “*You know? I’d be having a lot more fun if I knew where I was and who it was that brought me here!*”

I’m not so sure about Uncle Boo’s comment. He seemed to be having a good enough time as it was. And the more I think about it, there are plenty of times when you might be having a much better time if you didn’t know where you were or who brought you! It may be better not to be alert from time to time.

In the gospel reading on this first Sunday of Advent, Jesus tells his listeners to keep alert. “Keep alert...Keep awake...Keep awake.” Why keep awake? Why keep alert? Why keep watch?

Well, Advent begins with watching and waiting, with staying awake. Not just waiting for Christmas, but watching and waiting for the Lord’s return. In today’s passage, especially the second part, Jesus talks about his Second Coming, or as we prayed in our Collect, “*the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead.*” We are to keep awake and watch for His return.“ We are to be like servants waiting for the master of the house to return after a long journey. He didn’t say when He was going to return, but we need to be on the look out.

No one knows when this will happen, but we know that it will happen. This is what we affirm in our communion prayer when we say, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” But nobody knows when this Day of the Lord will take place.

Many people talk about it and prognosticate about it and plan for it. Many people even predict the date and time of the day of the Lord. They line up the texts from Revelation with the current events in the Middle East

and they say that Jesus will come again within the year, or in 2017 or within the next 50 years.

Biblically speaking, all that kind of talk is nonsense. Jesus himself says, “*concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*” So anyone that tells you that he has read the signs and wonders and warns that you’ll be “left behind” if you don’t get on the train now, then just tell him to go read his Bible.

So yes, Advent reminds us to stay awake and keep alert. But I want to go in a different direction in this Advent sermon. Because, Advent sermons that focus on waiting and watching for the Second coming have always depressed me. I’ve preached plenty of them myself, and have depressed myself with my own sermon. The image I conjure of waiting is not a good one.

I get terribly anxious when I’m waiting and watching. Especially when I’m waiting and watching for Christie. When she is out and I’m home and she’s late, then I get extremely anxious. I pace around and look out the windows every 5 seconds. I yell at the kids to turn the television down. I’m just sure that she’s gotten into a fatal car accident. I listen for Pegasus flying overhead to the UVA hospital, wait for a call from the police. I start planning life without her and I’m just miserable. All of this happens in a span of about 3 minutes. I just can’t help it.

Is it rational? Of course, not – although sadly we know these things can and do happen. But, do I know that when Christie is with someone she forgets all about time? Yes – and it’s one of the things I love about her. But that doesn’t have any effect on my anxiety. I could call her cell phone – *if she had a cell phone!* I’m pretty sure the main reason she doesn’t have a cell phone is because I would be calling her all the time.

So, that’s my image of waiting, watching for the Lord’s return. The command to stay awake isn’t much better. It’s kind of an impossible command! When you’re reading after dinner and really want to stay awake, you just can’t. It’s like you are getting hypnotized, “*You are getting very sleepy....*” Then you wake up 30 minutes later, book open the same page, glasses askew, mouth open, maybe a little bit of drool. Not a pretty sight.

And trying to sleep when you can’t sleep is way worse. Anybody who struggles with insomnia knows the cruelty of the night. You are exhausted, there is nothing you’d rather do than sleep, you’d give your kingdom for just

6 uninterrupted hours of shut-eye, and you just lay awake, your mind racing, your dread growing.

An article in the New York Times a few weeks ago called prescription sleeping pills the new “mother’s little helpers.” Nearly 3 in 10 American women fess up to using some kind of sleep aid at least a few nights a week. One woman confesses to taking Xanax at night, an anti-anxiety medication a few times a week. But she worries about addiction so some nights she just doesn’t sleep at all rather than take it. She sees *“the irony in not sleeping because she was anxious about taking an anti-anxiety medicine in order to sleep.”*

The point of talking about sleep and it’s lack thereof is that sometimes you just have no control over staying awake or falling asleep. Even drugs sometimes don’t do the trick. Sleep is one of God’s built-in indicators that you are not always in control. So, if we’re judged by Jesus’ command to stay awake, especially after 2000 years of waiting for Him to return, then we aren’t doing to well. Maybe that’s why waiting and watching sermons never go over very well.

There must be something more here in this Advent passage. Yes, of course it is true that we wait for the Lord to return, even long for the Day when He will come and all hurt and suffering and sorrow will come to an end. But, we need a little something now, don’t we?

And, by golly, we have a little something now – more than a little something. In the first part of today’s passage Jesus says, *“from the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”*

Did you catch that? This generation – Jesus’ generation – will not pass away until these things have taken place. Jesus is talking about something big happening, and happening right in their midst. It could be the destruction of the Temple, which happened in 70 AD, before that generation passed away. But He’s also talking about Himself, his own destruction, which would happen in just a few short days.

Yes, Jesus will come again. But in his death and resurrection we already have nothing less than the whole story – *the full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world, as we*

say in our Book of Common Prayer. Yes, He will come again, but *“since no one, not even Jesus, knows beans about the timing of that day, nothing counts now but our trust that, in Him everything is already fulfilled.”* (quote from Robert Capon) So, cheer up, sleepy Jean, as the song says! Yes He’s coming again, but Yes He’s already here.

Keep awake, Jesus says in today’s parable. He said it again just a few days later. And again, and again. Three times, in fact, as He was sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. *And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour?”* No they couldn’t, just like me. And guess what? He went and died for them anyway, for all of us who couldn’t and can’t stay awake like we ought to. Jesus stayed awake for us.

Keep alert, Jesus said. Many of us, if truth be told, don’t really know where we are or who brought us here. I’ll tell you the answer to that question this first Sunday of Advent. You are a sinner saved by grace and you’ve been brought into this house of forgiveness by your Savior “who neither slumbers nor sleeps”, but keeps watch over you, the one He loves.

Amen.