

Eleven months ago, I looked at this year's December calendar with our staff and ministry leaders. We saw the dates of Advent and Christmas Eve, thinking, 'well, this will be different.' Christmas Eve falls on the 4th Sunday of Advent, which means we only have 3 weeks of Advent this year. Usually we have four weeks to prepare our hearts for the Lord's birth.

I hope we will not miss the message of Advent in this short season. Jesus says, 'Be on guard, keep awake. What I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!' That is the Advent command—be awake for the coming of the Lord.

Advent is a Latin word meaning 'coming.' And Christians devote this season to meditate on the three comings of Christ—his first coming in the Incarnation, his second coming at the end of history, and his personal coming to our hearts. If this is your first experience observing Advent, that is the essence of the season—the three comings of Christ.

If you're familiar with Advent, you may have noticed that Advent always begins with a thunderclap—days of tribulation, the sun and moon darken, stars falling from heaven. We begin Advent meditating on the *second* coming of Jesus. Each successive week we meet characters central to Jesus' *first* coming—John the Baptist, Mary, and Joseph. This season ushers us from Jesus' second coming to his first coming, yet *every* week we prepare for his coming to our hearts.

So *how* do we prepare for the Lord's coming? Well, it's a bit of a paradox. Advent gives us permission to be excited. This seasons encourages anticipation and a crescendo of joy within our hearts. We are encouraged to become as children again, for we must become childlike to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. No coming of the Lord to our hearts is ordinary or mundane. Perhaps we are the ones who have lost a sense of wonder. G.K. Chesterton said, 'It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown

old, and our Father is younger than we.^{1'}

I think Chesterton would have understood the paradox of Advent, for he found Gospel truth in paradox. Advent encourages our childlike excitement, yet calls us to repentance, too. They belong together. There is a dual meaning in Advent's purple color: we can be outwardly excited to meet God's royal Son; we can embrace the inner way of repentance, for purple is the seasonal color of Lent, as well. Perhaps repentance in Advent is an invitation to be awake in this world just as we were when we were children.

Over Thanksgiving I took a different route through Fountain City to my parents' home, driving past my elementary school, Fountain City Elementary, home of the Pepcats. As I turned off Broadway, I slowed my car to remember those early years. But the memories came over me like a flood. In an instant, I could smell the cafeteria on pizza day. I could feel the morning cold when I saw my old station on Safety Patrol. I went through the halls and classrooms in my mind's eye. I ran to the blacktop where my friends and I dominated kickball in the late 80s. Man, I miss kickball in my life. Had the school been open, I think I could have made it to the gym blindfolded.

As I'm talking about my first school, you're probably transported in your mind to your first school. You know why? Because children are fully awake to their world—their eyes, their ears, especially the smells, the taste of food, the textures of their physical world. We're born alert, wide awake to this world, but over time our senses become dulled.

The same is true in the spiritual life. In the early years of our spiritual lives, whether that was your childhood or the first years after your conversion as an adult, you're awake to the presence of the Lord. You pray more boldly, believing God will hear and answer prayer. When faith became personal for me at age 11, I couldn't wait to read the Bible every day. I was a sponge. Grace was amazing, joy was my inheritance, and obedience was an honor. /

The faith of a child or a newborn Christian is untested by trials and

suffering, of course. Faith must mature through arid seasons, wrestle with doubts, and endure great suffering. I do not mean to suggest that there is salvation in nostalgia, because that is not where God dwells. Jesus calls us to a childlike faith, not a childish faith that would live in denial of real and difficult trials.

But, to quote Chesterton, have we sinned and grown old? Are you still awake to the presence of the Lord after all these years following Him? Are you awake to his grace? Does your soul find joy in the Lord? When was the last time you caught yourself smiling because of the goodness of the Lord? //

We live in between the first and second coming of Christ. Like a song that you put on repeat, Jesus says to his disciples, "Stay awake!"

Return with me to Mark 13.24-37 in your pew Bible on page ????. I want to concentrate on verses 33-34 in these remaining moments: *Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake.*

Before we arrive at the Bethlehem manger in three short weeks, we have to wrestle with this dilemma—the Lord will come again, but he's shown immense patience in his return. We're two thousand years removed from his ascension. The Lord's patience is not of this world.

The early apostles and churches expected Jesus' return soon after his ascension. Jesus foretells some very grim events in Mark 13, but these events happened in 70 A.D. Look at verse 30: *Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.* The Lord was describing the destruction of Herod's Temple by the Romans in Mark 13, an event that meant the end of the world for Israel. For the Church, it was confirmation that Jesus was reigning at the right hand of the Father over all nations. Once that event happened, it *seemed* like all was prepared for the return of the Lord. Yet we're still waiting for his return 2,000 years later. The Lord's patience is not of this world.

Though the Lord was addressing a specific historical event (the destruction of the Temple), he still addresses his Church today: *Be on guard, keep awake*. That is the twofold command Jesus gives us: be on guard, keep awake.

To paraphrase Jesus' words for our times this morning, I must ask: am I sleepwalking through this world? //

The philosopher Charles Taylor says that our age may be defined by a sense of malaise. We've never had more sources for visual stimulation and yet people complain of boredom like never before. Human beings will always seek spiritual fullness because we are made in the image of God. But we're seeking fulfillment in places that can't fulfill the deepest needs of our souls—social media, Netflix, and the devices we hold in our hands.

The easy access to technology also means we always have a backup option in any circumstance where waiting is involved—grocery store lines, retail lines, doctor's offices. In my lifetime, it's like there's a silent revolution to eliminate waiting for anything, anywhere. In other words, I can escape this situation. I'm in control. I don't have to wait; I can be entertained. It's never more pervasive in the month of December.

These micro-decisions are not without spiritual consequences. If you don't face boredom, how will you ever listen to your soul? If you can escape waiting in daily life, how will you learn patience when it matters most—in family life, in your vocation, in your friendships, when your body becomes ill?

Now I'm not saying it's bad to look at your phone in public, or even in some instances when you're waiting. What I'm asking is this: are you awake to the human beings around you? Wherever you go, you are an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. Are you watching your soul, listening to your heart throughout the day? Moments of waiting can be transformed into conversations with the Holy Spirit, opportunities to experience the presence of the Lord.

We need the Lord to wake us up not just in singular moments, but over

months of living. I need the Lord to stir my soul regarding the patterns of my soul that may have passed unnoticed from one day to the next.

Am I growing numb year after year to the stories of suffering around the world or even down the street? Let me never fall asleep and when I nod off, wake me up Lord.

Am I just putting in the time at school or work until something more exciting comes along? Keep me from falling asleep and when I start nodding off, wake me up Lord.

Have I allowed a cynical spirit to lull me to sleep? Keep me from falling into a deep sleep, and wake me up, Lord.

Advent is a season both of joyful anticipation and intentional repentance. But the goal of repentance is the return of joy. David prayed in his great prayer of repentance, 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation.'

So it's part of Christian tradition that we would practice repentance during the Advent season. It's a lesser fast than Lent, but the spirit is the same. We abstain from certain things to prepare for the spiritual feast of Christmas.

You're probably most familiar with fasting related to your stomach, but I encourage you to practice another form of fasting that saints have practiced for centuries—the fast of the eyes. [Repeat]

The fast of the eyes is as old as Psalm 119, when the psalmist wrote: Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.

Upon what things do you fix your eyes that have no spiritual worth? Consider a fast of the eyes this Advent. Maybe you could be conscious about how often your eyes are bowed over your smartphone, especially in public spaces. You might take greater care about the time you spend in front of screens. Consider the words or images you regularly read or hear: will they keep your heart and soul awake, seeking the Lord's presence?

[Slow down] Instead of nodding off to sleep; instead of sleepwalking through this world, lift up your eyes. Lift up your eyes in stores and restaurants this December. Look for the nametags of the people who serve you. Call them by name for they bear the image of God. Lift up your eyes when you enter your workplace, knowing that God has placed you as his servant there, and see how you can serve the work and serve your colleagues as if they were Christ himself.

Lift up your eyes when you greet your family and friends. Ask the Lord's help that you would see them through His eyes, not as you wish they would be in *your* image.

Lift up your eyes when you enter your home. Christians should see their homes differently. We are trustees of a house, an apartment, for no place on earth is our true home. But look at your temporary home as an outpost of new creation—a place of simple beauty; a place to gather family and friends.

And finally, lift up your eyes to the sky, especially in those evening hours. Just like you did when you were a child. I mean this: literally look at the evening sky as a spiritual, prayerful practice. There's a different, humbler splendor to a December sunset, not nearly as awesome as a midsummer sunset. It is as if these Advent sunsets prepare us for the advent of a Savior born in a humble manger.

And with your eyes lifted up to these December skies, look at the sky like a scroll. For the sky tells a story of God who made this world, redeemed this world, and will return to this world. Maybe even join Isaiah's prayer as you look into the sky these three short weeks, praying, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down. Please look, we are all your people."

And do not despair in the waiting, but allow joy to increase in the waiting. For this story will end one day, and it will end in glory—glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*