

WAKE UP!

Romans 13:11-14
December 2, 2007
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When I was a teenager, I loved to sleep in. I would barricade myself behind the bedroom door, pull the covers up over my head, and sleep just as long as I could. My mother understood that with a heavy school schedule and an after school job at the supermarket, I was often sleep deprived. But she also believed that the time for sleeping had its limits. So, on Saturdays, late in the morning, she would come to my bedroom door and knock, open it slightly and tell me it was time to get up. I always ignored her. A few minutes later she would appear again, this time speaking a little louder, reminding me that I was sleeping my life away. Of course, I was a teenager and didn't care. If she had to come back a third time, which she often did, she wouldn't say anything. Instead, she would creep up on me like a spider, walk to the foot of the bed, grab the sheets and covers, and in one seamless movement, pile them all on the floor. Then she would walk around to all four windows, pulling the curtains open while she announced: **WAKE UP!**

During these increasingly dark and cold days of approaching winter, when it is our natural human tendency to nest and hibernate and sleep, the call of Advent to **WAKE UP** may seem counter-intuitive. In Advent, just when we're ready to snuggle down for a long winter's nap, God our mother walks into the rooms of our lives, pulls off all the covers, and demands **WAKE UP!**

That's a pretty bracing image, isn't it? And what on earth does it have to do with virgin mothers, singing angels, strange stars and mangers? Nothing. Those are Christmas images, not Advent images. They put the cart before the horse and the driver is rampant consumerism. Instead, in Advent, we wait in the darkness for the promise. In that way, Advent really has more in common with Lent than it does with Christmas. Christmas might be about redemption, but Advent is about the realization that we need to be redeemed. Advent, at least in part, is about judgment.

This truth was brought home to me in a powerful, if uncomfortable way two years ago today, when as part of the final step before being called to Broadway, I was asked to preach a candidate sermon in a neutral pulpit up in Westchester County. It was a cold and snowy morning. Not many folks were at church that day because of the weather. I think Broadway's search committee made up half the congregation. But there was a grand processional to open the service anyway, singing the hymn we opened our service with today: "Jesus Comes With Clouds Descending." It is a lovely, majestic melody, but I remember being perplexed and slightly disturbed by its reference to the second coming of Jesus and the idea of judgment. There, on a snowy morning in the weeks before Christmas, I didn't really want to sing: "Every eye shall then behold you, robed in awesome majesty; those who jeered and mocked and sold you, pierced and nailed you to the tree, shamed and grieving, shamed and grieving, shamed and grieving, shall their true Messiah see." Singing those words was the spiritual equivalent of having the covers ripped off the bed on a cold and sleepy morning and hearing again and again: **WAKE UP.**

Judgment is not something you'll hear a lot about in progressive churches. Many of us have been judged enough for a lifetime. Most of us know talk of judgment can be used to manipulate and control people. We understand that judgment talk can distort the Gospel's message of extravagant welcome. But in our zeal to lift up the love and forgiveness of God, in our tendency to skip over any words about judgment, could it be that we distort the message of the Gospel, and thereby participate in making Christmas a spiritually vapid observance?

Advent's call to WAKE UP is about our need to change. The truth is that many of us move through our lives half asleep. We say we prefer the light, but it is the darkness that is really our friend. We know that in the light of day there is work to do. We know that in the light, we will see ourselves more clearly. Our nakedness and need and raw humanity just might be exposed. And in our fear of what that kind of judgment will look like or mean, we pull the covers over our heads, like Ebenezer Scrooge, hoping that the spirits of Christmas will simply leave us alone, in the dark.

But God, whose love for us, whose desire for our good, whose belief in our potential and promise knows no boundaries, will not leave us alone. We may grouse like teenagers who want to stay in bed, but God will have none of it, exposing us to the light while insisting: WAKE UP!

Saint Paul said it like this to the Christians in Rome: "it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became

believers; the night is far-gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

When my mom forced me up, I had to deal with all sorts of things I would have preferred not to: my very confusing teenage life, acne, high school, my place as the oldest child, work and duty and discipline. To my immature eyes, the light of day was cruel. Leave me alone. Let me sleep. But my mother knew that it was only in being fully awake and out in the world that I would see those things that needed to change. It was the light that would both expose me and grow me.

And I think that’s what God’s judgment is really all about. It’s not God as a stern father waiting to punish us for the slightest infraction. It is God, calling us to WAKE UP so that we can see ourselves – warts and all - in the bright light of truth. And yes, that part of judgment can be frightening. But it’s not the end of the story. Judgment is never God’s final word. Judgment simply clears the decks and prepares us to really hear and experience God’s final word. Forced out of the beds of our complacency and into the light, we become not only aware of our need, but also aware of the promise of grace and forgiveness and peace that comes to us in a baby named Jesus, Emmanuel, which means God is with us. And when we can see our need and the grace of God at the same time, then we can join the angels in singing: “Glory to God in the highest. Peace and good will.” Amen.