

Awake In Christ

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The Christian Church often behaves perversely, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worst. Advent is one of those times when the world heads in one direction and we Christians are supposed to be heading in another. And some of us actually do.

Outside, it's cold, it's dark, and our natural inclination is to eat lots of carbs before heading into our burrows, as the Christmas poem famously puts it, "for a long winter's nap." Winter is the season for slumbering, for quiet, for retreat, for having put up adequate provisions for earth's barren months. "All is safely gathered in, 'ere the winter storms begin," we sang in Henry Alford's harvest hymn last Sunday. Nothing comes in and very little goes out. We circle our wagons, hunker down, and snuggle up to the spots that are warm, safe, cozy, and comfortable.

So perhaps it's not a great surprise that the church, in just such a season as that, calls us to wake up, to rouse ourselves, and prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ. We want to slumber; the church hears the voice of Christ calling us to action for, as Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, "now is the moment for you to wake from sleep . . . the night is far gone, the day is near."

That's the language of eschatology – the end times that have provided some Christians with such fertile ground for speculation. Let's not indulge ourselves speculating about matters that Jesus told us no one knows much about. Christ's return, however and whenever it happens, is God's business; our business is to prepare ourselves for it, and we do that by waking up and keeping ourselves awake in Christ.

The journalist Haynes Johnson popularized the phrase "sleepwalking through history" in his 1991 analysis of the Reagan era, and it captures the reality of life for many of us. The vast majority of us sleepwalk through life. At best, we're half-awake to reality. We see what we want to see, hear what we want to hear, pay attention to what we want to pay attention to. We're mostly unconsciously aware of the world that exists beyond the narrow periphery of our tastes and likes and wants, and social media has made this fragmentation of life much, much worse.

I was reminded of this spectacular capacity for tunnel-vision the other evening when I watched a documentary entitled "College Behind Bars," about the Bard College program to help prison inmates educate themselves in preparation for their eventual release. Most of us couldn't care less about the 2.3 million Americans behind bars; after all, they deserve to be there, however brutal and wasteful "there" is. Education is for the good people, not the offenders. Tax dollars should be used to punish criminals, not equip them for life after they've done their time. That's the thinking that keeps programs like the Bard Prison Initiative the struggling exception rather than the well-funded and well-supported rule.

But every now and then, someone wakes up in Christ and sees the appalling waste and perpetuation of the vicious cycle of violence in our so-called criminal justice system, which falls so heavily and disproportionately on ethnic minorities and poor people. Someone wakes up to the redemptive power of treating people like the children of God that they are, and not simply as offenders or criminals or the incarcerated. The Christ who is the eternal uncreated Word of God

awakens such a person, who may or may not be a Christian. We should never be so foolish as to think that the Christ only operates in Christians. The anointing of God's Holy Spirit, which is what the Christ means, has never been limited to the folks in our religious tent.

Every now and then someone wakes up in Christ to the systemic roots of a problem like hunger, as Art Simon did when he and some neighbors in New York City's Lower East Side founded Bread for the World. Why not put a fence at the top of cliff rather than just keep ambulances waiting at the bottom? Simon asked, quoting a favorite expression of his father's. It's an old idea some of us learned at home – an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure – but it's an idea that is difficult to grasp if you're sleepwalking through budget hearings or Sunday morning worship or salivating greedily at a politician's mention of a tax cut. Christ calls us to wake up, open our eyes, pay attention, prayerfully consider, and act.

Rachel Carson woke up in Christ in the 1950s when she saw the environmental damage caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides that generated so much profit for the chemical industry. A friend of Carson's, Olga Owens Huckins, wrote to *The Boston Herald* in 1958 describing the death of song birds around her property in Duxbury, Massachusetts, after areal spraying of DDT by the state to kill mosquitoes. Huckins sent a copy of her letter to Rachel Carson, who had been documenting the lethal effects of pesticides since the 1940s. The mounting scientific evidence, as well as Carson's own belief in the integrity and sanctity of creation, convinced Carson to put her findings in book form, the elegy and call to arms for dying song birds that we know as *Silent Spring*.

Keep awake, Jesus the Christ says to his followers. That crucified and risen voice says, I've awakened you to justice, to mercy, to compassion, to the path of peace, to what a life devoted to God and others looks like – stay awake. Don't fall back into the drowsy comfort of drifting along, of following the crowd or the crowd's leader, of self-absorbed self-interest. Keep awake to the urgings of a God-centered conscience, to the promptings of an untameable Spirit, to the cries of the oppressed and marginalized muffled by mountains of stuff and information and misinformation.

Keep awake, Jesus says, because you do not know the hour for the reappearance of the Human One, and you do not want to be caught sleeping. You do not want the judgment of history – the judgment of his story, two words – to fall against you as one of the guilty bystanders, too busy or too tired or too confused or, worst of all, too self-absorbed to minister to a suffering world. There are plenty of examples of people who heard the voice of God's Anointed One and stayed awake, so we have no excuse to be caught out when our time runs out.

We have just celebrated Thanksgiving, and one of the chief things to be thankful for is the example of those awake in Christ. They may or may not be Christians; that doesn't matter (and that will upset a lot of Christians). What matters is that they awoke from the slumber of indifference and self-regard. They awoke to the voice of cosmic love calling them to join the joyful parade of those who said they were glad to go to the house of the Lord. They awoke and are asking us to come out of our winter borrows and join them in Advent expectation.