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# Watching and Waking

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## *Watching and Waking*

A Sermon by The Reverend Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Episcopal Church at Yale

November 29, 2020

*Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37*

### REFLECTION:

*Welcome to Advent at ECY. The odd thing about the usual academic calendar (as opposed to the really weird one this year) is that you never know whether you'll miss Holy Week, Epiphany or some other liturgical season. This year, since we miss all of Advent except for tonight, and because in these times we desperately need some regularities in our lives, I thought we'd start with a simple reflection on the Advent candles, all five of them:*

*(Light 1<sup>st</sup> PURPLE candle] The first Advent candle represents HOPE. Let us pray: God of hope, in the tradition of the prophets, may we each serve as messengers of hope in this uncertain time.*

*(Light 2<sup>nd</sup> PURPLE candle] The second Advent candle represents PEACE. Let us pray: God of peace, may each of us be agents of peace in our homes, our communities and the world.*

*(Light 3<sup>rd</sup> PINK candle] The third Advent candle represents JOY. Let us pray. God of joy, may we surprised by joy in serving you, your people, and the whole earth.*

*(Light 4<sup>th</sup> PURPLE candle] The fourth Advent candle represents LOVE, for without love, none of the others are possible. Let us pray: God, you are love, may each of us be bearers of your love in all we do, and for all whom we meet.*

*(Light 5<sup>th</sup> WHITE candle] The fifth Advent candle represents Christ, the living light that burns within our hearts and minds. God, may your light comfort us in our uncertainty, may it warm our intentions into flames of action, and may it light our way on the path home to you. Amen.*

### SERMON:

*(From the Book of Common Prayer in the Province of the West Indies):*

Blessed be the Lord our God

By whose grace we are yet alive.

Blessed be God's son Jesus Christ

By whose rising we are set free.

Blessed be the spirit of God

In whom is our hope and joy.

(and the people say) *Amen.*

Ushering in the season of Advent always brings me back to one of my first Sundays of Advent at ECY. I was sitting in my office on Friday working on my sermon, and reflecting on a meeting I'd had the day before with a first year who rattled off her many new activities at Yale – from breakfast with suitemates, classes, eating her first froyo, and her role as “flyer” on the cheerleading team – describing each one as “amazing...” except for the few that were “awesome.” It was as if her whole year stretched out before her as an uninterrupted series of joy-filled events. To be honest, I found it a little exhausting.

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In the midst of my reverie, the phone rang. It was another ECY member who reported that this same student, immediately after our meeting, had gone to cheerleading practice, where over and over, she had her teammates throw her high into the air... until they missed the catch, and she landed directly on her head.

Thankfully, after several months of rehab, she fully recovered. But the experience completely changed her. As we visited, she described a level of resilience she never thought she had. She discovered the richness of quiet time, just pondering what was going on inside her, thinking less about what she was doing and more about who she was becoming, less about what others thought of her, and more about what *she* wanted out of her relationships, including with God. It was as if as she was shifting from what theologians describe as *chronos*, chronological time, to *kairos*, spiritual time.

In church land we call the Pentecost season we just ended “ordinary time.” But it goes without saying, it’s been anything but ordinary. Living in what was supposed to be the protective “Yale bubble,” we’ve had the ongoing struggle over accepting a college experience none of us planned for – graduation, breaks, so many clubs and extracurriculars... cancelled; the constant fear of getting sick, the social isolation, trying to think clearly through a “COVID brain,” the unrelenting demands of virtual classes, having to move in the middle of the year, responding to the demand for racial justice, the mind-numbing polarization in our country, the sheer exhaustion of it all. And the uncertainty – always the uncertainty – of when all of this will end.

So since this is the last ECY worship service in 2020, it might be useful to begin saying goodbye to this unprecedented year – and to ask just what it is we’ve been learning.

One of the first lessons was that it wreaked havoc with our most sacred idol – productivity. And it led many of us to ask whether the alternative to that addiction might be a wise blend of living in the present moment, and acting with intentionality. Six months into COVID time, Blair Braverman, who runs sled dogs in Alaska, wrote an Op Ed in the *Times*. He writes, *“I used to be a dedicated planner. I knew what I’d do every day, weeks in advance. Having a plan made me feel confident and safe. And then I got into long distance dog sledding, and I discovered that the only thing worse than not having a plan, was the stress of having one and constantly breaking it. Working with dogs in the wilderness means negotiating countless changing variables: snow and wind, wild animals, open water, broken equipment, each dog’s needs and changing moods. I learned that plans, when I made them, were nothing but a sketch; the only thing I needed to count on was that the dogs and I would make wise decisions along the way.”*

The second thing we’re learning is that we are massively more resilient than we ever thought. In fact, another Op Ed in the *Times* recently claimed that we had *“successfully produced”* (note the language) *“the most resilient young adults in a generation.”* And this may well be true. But I hope it’s also becoming a time, like that first year student, in which you can finally anticipate some space to think your own thoughts, to consider more deeply what’s going on inside you, to explore your own interior geography, whether the high speed railway you’ve been on to success may need re-directing.

Last year one student put it this way in her sermon, *“What would you dare do if you knew there was absolutely no chance you’d fail?”* The operative questions in considering where you’re headed in this world – view might well be ones like *“What makes my heart sing?”* or the classic one from theologian Frederick Buechner, *“Where do my great passions meet the world’s great needs?”*

If you find these invitations attractive, at least after you’ve fought back the absolute terror, Jesus’ words in today’s gospel couldn’t be more apt. *“Keep alert...”* Jesus says, *“Keep awake.”*

I remember the first lesson our dog trainer used on our now still very puppyish three year old mutts, Paddy and Maisie. That first night, the teacher took a little treat and he let Paddy and Maisie sniff it. He passed it back and forth between their eager eyes and his own, saying over and over, “Watch!” Once they were fixated on the trainer, they got the treat. *“That’s the basis of all other commands,”* the trainer said, *“If you can get your puppy to watch you with excited anticipation, to really focus on you, everything else falls into place.”*

And that’s what Advent is all about. My beloveds, let’s give thanks that God – and it could only have been God – got most of us through this absolutely awful year. And let’s agree that if we can just keep our eyes and hearts focused on God, we can get through the rest of it.

Advent is all about waking ourselves up and watching, rather than simply waiting for the next catastrophe

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to do us in. The Latin words *ad venire*, mean ‘coming,’ and in Advent, we’re *expecting* the coming of God into our lives at every moment, right here, right now. We’re watching, as one theologian put it, “*in the conviction that we’ve already seen God’s footsteps.*” Or as C. S. Lewis famously said, we’re waiting to be “*surprised by joy.*” Maybe that’s why the Latin root of the word ‘Advent’ is the same as for the word ‘adventure.’

Beloved sisters and brothers. Thank God for Advent, a time for us to draw close to each other, and to begin again the joy – filled adventure of co – creating with God the world of shalom – one conversation, one act of kindness, one demonstration, one day at a time, knowing the best news we awake to each morning is that our God of love has been, and will be with us every step of the way. Now in your breakout rooms, please share *your* most important learnings in 2020.

*Final Blessing (excerpted from Gene Robinson’s Obama inaugural blessing (adapted from a Franciscan Blessing):*

May God bless you with a restless *discomfort* about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy *anger* at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work tirelessly for justice, freedom and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of *tears*, to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough *foolishness* to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God’s grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

And may the blessing of God, who made you, who loves you, and who travels every step with you, be upon you this night and remain with you forever. *Amen.*