

Do you ever sleep with eyes open? Or walk in your sleep? How about those around you? This is the time of year our grandparents remembered Pearl Harbor, as we remember September 11, 2001. There were signs to be seen but everyone was caught be surprised. *How often do we sleep in our waking and walk in our sleep?*

Jesus was preparing his disciples for his last days of ministry; and the first days of theirs. For the last days of an old kingdom, and the beginning of a new one. For three years he had tried to get them ready, but they kept missing the signs. No matter how plainly he told them, they just walked as if they were asleep. And so he told them a story, for that seemed to be the best way to get their attention.

"What do you see when you look at a fig tree in the summer? Leaves, right? And so, even if you don't have a calendar, but see leaves you know by that sign what season it is." He had their attention and the days that followed were ones they would never forget. And later they would remember the signs: foot washing, bread and wine, a crucified Messiah, an empty cross, an empty tomb, and a risen Savior.

Advent is a gift to keep us from approaching Christmas as if we were walking in our sleep. It reminds us not to miss the signs, to keep our eyes open, to stay awake and prepare for the greatest moment the world has ever heard or seen – a baby in a manger, God in the flesh, the beginning of an answer to sin, and guilt, and death.

So here are the themes: Be alert! Stay awake! Watch! Listen! Stay awake!

Anyone can get ready for Christmas by doing what is always done: trees, gifts, cards, parties, carols and cookies and Santas at the mall. But how does any of that help us to remember what we are getting ready for if our eyes are closed to the signs that God has placed in our hearts and lives?

You know what it is like to travel a familiar road and suddenly you arrive at your destination and wonder what you have missed along the way! We too often approach Christmas in the same way, and suddenly wake up and realize it is over before we even had a chance to get ready. Any journey is a poor one if we simply go through the motions, rather than enjoy everything we pass along the way!

We can hang all the decorations we want to, but they simply hide what will still be there later. We can shop till we drop or pull out charge cards till the plastic melts, but how will any of that change life, and living, and faith, hope and love?

Advent is a reminder that the world appears to be awake and engaged but is often asleep at the switch while all around us is changing. We all know that but maybe this year we will pay attention.

Do you remember as little kids when we were taught that before we crossed a street to “stop, look, and listen?” Today the streets are so big and busy that we need a car to cross and when we don’t, we are often so distracted with iPods and cares and worries that it is easy to miss what is coming next.

Many years ago when my life was in turmoil, struggling with the reality of the death of a loved one, I was daydreaming and staring at the parking lot. I saw a deer. And it surprised me, as I had never seen a deer in this lot the middle of the day. For whatever reason that was an answer to unspoken prayers and I felt at peace.

And over the years, I have watched for the deer and see them often now. I still have that reminder of peace, but also wonder how often they were there before that first day, but I was somehow so preoccupied with other stuff that I never took time to open my eyes and see them!

How does it feel for you when you realize you have been walking in your sleep and don’t even know what you have missed along the way?

Advent is a bless-ed interruption that cries out: STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!

Just as Jesus tried to shake his disciples out of their comfortable sleep walking, we have the annual privilege of being pulled out of ours. Advent has begun. The signs are all around us. A new kingdom has dawned and the joy of a birth is what set it into motion. Will you keep sleepwalking, or will you take the time to open your eyes, prepare your hearts, and welcome your king?

Once upon a time, a young mother was facing the possibility of death, but wanted to keep her life as normal “along the way” as she could. But because she was loved, her many friends started babysitting, cleaning her house, and bringing extra meals. Welcome as that was, she was amazed by the change of everyone around her. She asked, “why is everyone treating me differently now? They act as if I am dying?” Much as she appreciated such attention, she didn’t feel she deserved it and wondered why she was treated with such love.

I relayed that concern to a trusted friend name Lavonne, and she told me, “You know the reality is that we are all dying, we just don’t remember to treat each other as if we are! And isn’t that the truth, why do we miss the reality that is around us?”

Now that is an Advent message, for Lavonne knew how to keep her eyes open!

This is what it means to open your eyes. To read the signs. To live with the love of a Savior who prepared us for today AND tomorrow! How neat it would be if we treated each and every one we love as if today were their last day ... or ours? What a gift that would be to take the time to share such signs of Gods love and see them in the gifts that others share with us.

When we pray “thy kingdom come” Luther reminds us that the kingdom already has come! But in this prayer we are asking God to keep us mindful of and joyfully in that kingdom all ways!

How tragic for those who will never have eyes opened, who think they are living but are sleepwalking. Rather than let them stumble, or follow them into the darkness, pray that our joy will not only keep our eyes open but help other to see what they might have missed. And learn what they have possibly never known.

Sure, Advent gets us ready for Christmas. But even more it helps get us ready for every tomorrow. And reminds us that the birth of a Savior makes each day one of joyous celebration.

Often I feel guilty because I have learned to listen better with my youngest, and wish I could go back and redo time with my oldest. But I have also learned that it is better to celebrate that my eyes have been opened, and make sure I don't ever close them again! In that way I can celebrate my growth, and honor my oldest by not making the same mistakes twice.

And so rather than guilt, such signs become full of joy, for open eyes learn new things. And open hearts learn new ways to love. And open arms gather the blessings that God keeps dropping in our laps! The disciples would learn that the coming kingdom was both a now and later “gift.” And we too, as we anticipate heaven, are called to live in that new kingdom already, NOW!

Christmas IS coming – are you walking in your sleep or waking to a new dawn? -tws