

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Amen

Imagine you are on a trip through Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. As you exit the elevator more than 750 feet below the arid surface, you join a guided tour that will take you even deeper into the mysteries of the cavern. Each room or cave within the cavern shows beautiful geological formations that have taken nature millennia to sculpt out of the limestone walls. Each new twist and turn reveals another majestic room that is more splendid than any castle you would ever find in Europe. Before turning back you come to a magnificent room that is now 850 feet underground. The park ranger gives out the warning and then it happens. The lights are turned off and total darkness engulfs you. It is as if a permanent inky blackness has surrounded you and nothing will erase it. You put your hand in front of your face and see nothing. As you stare at the black nothingness where your hand should be you notice the ghostly image of a hand begins to appear but you quickly realize that is your mind inserting this image for it is too dark to see even one inch in front of your face. The darkness seems to press in with such force that it is hard not to panic. You begin to wonder if there is any light out there. What if the lights never come back on? What if you are stuck in this place? At least there is the hope that after 60 excruciating and suffocating seconds, the light will come.

Now imagine you are following Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. Jesus keeps giving cryptic clues about what is to happen and who he is but sometimes he is just so puzzling to understand. You and your people have lived in a metaphoric darkness for so long. Yet, there is hope that a light will come, an eternal light will break through. He says, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory." You can relate to these words because they are your story, they are our story, and somehow they are our hope. Darkness... more darkness... but then a son, a light...

This week we start a new liturgical year and begin a year-long journey through the Gospel of Mark. As we travel through this gospel, we will find themes of Jesus' suffering where a cross becomes a throne. Mark focuses on authentic discipleship that is characterized by self-sacrifice. Mark also calls for faithful vigilance during an arduous, ambiguous time between the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom of God and that is where we find ourselves today. These verses from today's Gospel lesson are often called the little apocalypse or the synoptic apocalypse. They are a part of a larger dialogue about the destruction of the temple and false teachers. This is immediately followed by Mark's passion narrative leading to the cross where the kingdom of God will be inaugurated. But the readers of the gospel still wait for the full consummation of that kingdom. We begin the season of Advent, the start of the church calendar not in the beginning of time or with a baby in a manger or even with John the Baptist. No we begin in that wonderful and yet nebulous time of the already but not yet. We begin where we are today...

"Beware; keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." In Jesus' teaching we quickly see that God is not and will not be where we necessarily expect to find God. Yet

there is hope and there is a light breaking through the darkness. No sun, no moon, no stars... just the Son of Man. The story of the fig tree is comforting because it is about beginnings - not endings. It offers hope in the imminence of the coming season. What we discover in today's Gospel lesson as in all our lessons today is hopeful watching and waiting. The waiting that is prescribed is not passive. It is not like waiting for a bus to come but rather it is active waiting like the anticipation of a parade once the bands can be heard in the distance or house guests set to arrive any minute once the home is set and ready or the fly that gently lands with your rod ready for the trout to rise and strike.

Keep awake... See the light... Prepare the way... O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!

Back in the darkness of the cavern, a clicking sound is made and sparks fly into the air. Each golden flicker is blinding. Finally a flame that vanquishes the darkness appears and a single candle is lit. The light has broken through the darkness. All of your worries instantly fade and you are at peace.

So how do these verses apply to us today? Simply put, "Keep awake." These seem like cruel words to me right now as Casey and I are parents of a four month old and seem out of place for most of our society. In fact we live in an over caffeinated culture of busy-ness that gets busier in the weeks after Thanksgiving. Although the world is busy in this new season, it is rare that that busy-ness is pointed to the coming Christ. Advent is about the hopeful expectation of the Messiah.

It was a little over a year ago that we found out that Casey was pregnant. This season of our lives brought a whole new meaning to hopeful expectation... active waiting. On the other side of a pregnancy, Advent is also like the nervous family member anticipating a birth in the waiting room. They wait and wait for the announcement "It's a girl" or "It's a boy." Perhaps they nervously eat or fidget or pace back and forth. But when the waiting ends there is pure joy. This Advent season we sit in a strange place between watching as a pregnant woman rides a donkey on her way to Bethlehem and also living with a hopeful heart that cries out we await Christ's coming again.

We anticipate the birth of Jesus by being exhorted to wait for his coming again. This is fitting because we are right there awaiting the Messiah just as many anxiously awaited the Messiah those two thousand years ago. Yet, we live in the already but not yet... that means we know that Christmas will arrive and when it will be. We know many of the stories that surround the celebration. Yet as our lesson teaches us there is much we don't know and this season of Advent requires more from us. A great light has broken into the darkness and that light lives inside of us. Are we being attune to its presence or are we restless in the darkness and asleep to God's continuous coming.

What are you doing to prepare yourself? How do we live into this enormous calling of Advent? How in our already busy lives filled with work, parenting, grand parenting, school, shopping, decorating, cleaning, partying, and church going do we keep awake, see the new light, prepare the way? We often find ourselves asleep to the spiritual season while physically we drive ourselves to the point of exhaustion. The reality is that Advent is a time to set our hearts toward

the coming Messiah: past, present, and future. We are to do the will of God... we are to be faithful disciples living in the light, being a light, and keeping awake to the presence of God.

Being faithful Christians does not just happen but rather requires care, attention, perseverance, and cultivation. I urge all of us to use this Advent as we lead up to the feast of the incarnation as a time to prepare the way. Yes there are a lot of busy activities to prepare for Christmas but it is also a time to be active in being contemplative. It is not enough to simply talk around God or to maybe even talk about God. That is good but we are also called to experience God. We are called to experience Emmanuel, God with us. Are you expecting to meet Christ when you come to worship? Are you expecting to meet Christ in the world when you leave this place? Are you expecting to share the experience of Christ with others and proclaim he is coming?

We are to keep awake not in worldly busy-ness but in contemplativeness and prayer. Keep awake in serving as Christ's hands and feet. Keep awake in experiencing the grace of the Messiah, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Lamb of God, babe in a manger, and "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." For no matter how dark it might be a light has broken in; a candle shines in the dark cavern of our broken world. Prepare the way... prepare your heart... And cry out with expecting voices O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Amen.