

Message for December 3, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday of Advent ~ *Those Who Dream* Worship Series
“Keep Awake in Hope” Rev. Trish Eckert

There is so much rich imagery in the Bible Wisdom teachings read this morning. The author of the portion of Isaiah we heard most likely wrote these words during the time following the Israelites’ return from their exile in Babylon. Having made their way home, they were wrestling with questions of what their life, their community, their relationship with God would look like now. Isaiah 64 gives voice to their longing for a God who seems absent, even as they grapple with guilt over their own brokenness.

“You have hidden your face from us,” the writer says to God. That accusation haunts me, as does God’s response in the following chapter: “I was ready,” God replies, “to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that did not call on my name” (Is. 65.1).

It might be easy to condemn the writer for accusing God of hiding when, in fact, the people of Israel seem to have been the ones turning their faces from God. Yet I know that very impulse in my own self, am well acquainted with the part of me that yearns for God even at the same time that I put up resistance.

In the midst of that “Come closer, go away” dance that I sometimes do with God, I periodically stop to wonder, what is it that I’m doing anyway, asking for the living God to become known to me? I think of Annie Dillard’s question in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, where, in reflecting on the ways we speak to God in worship services, she asks, “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?” She goes on to observe, “It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

That’s the nitty gritty of it, the possibility that Dillard offers: at the heart of my resistant longing for God is the knowledge that to call upon the living God, to ask the Creator to tear open and rip into my universe, means giving

myself to the prospect, the surety, that God will take me in directions I can't control and draw me out to places from which I can never return.

That is the challenge, and the gift.

This business of asking God to come close, though, to tear through the separateness in order to reach us: that's not how it really works, of course. The tearing doesn't go in that direction, as if God needed to punch a hole in some far-off heaven in order to come down to us. The incarnation, which we anticipate and celebrate in this season, reminds us that God is ever present, immanent, closer than our breathing.

If God pervades all creation, pervades us, then the barrier that needs to be torn away isn't outside us; it's within. In our own interior universe, in the cosmos we carry inside us, God lives, moves, breathes.

It is actually the reading from Mark's Gospel today that has been surfacing over and over in my head and heart. In the last couple of weeks leading up to opening the warming room, I've struggled with sleep – so many details to attend to, so much not yet done. So, this week as I contemplated the Bible Wisdom teachings and prepared for my sermon, it wasn't lost on me, alert in the small hours, how Advent always begins with a word about wakefulness. “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come,” Jesus says in this passage about the end of days that, along with its parallels in Matthew and Luke's Gospels, is known as the “Little Apocalypse.” “...And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

It's a different kind of wakefulness, of course, that Jesus is talking about here as he tells his hearers how to recognize the signs of his returning. The wakefulness that Jesus describes is a state—a practice, a way of being—that bears little resemblance to the ways we usually try to keep ourselves (or unwittingly find ourselves awake, methods that usually leave us jangly-nerved and less than fully functional.)

Jesus urges us toward a kind of awareness in which, whatever else we are doing—even in resting and sleeping—some part of us remains open, stays alert, pays attention to what is unfolding and reflects on what it means. Jesus is talking here about cultivating the habit of keeping vigil: the art of waiting. He is describing a kind of awareness and attention in which we learn to not rely solely on what we can see (“the sun will be darkened,”

Jesus says, “and the moon will not give its light.”) but turn to the wisdom of the other senses, to discern what they can tell us about what is unfolding in the world around us.

Here at Tippe, this community has undergone so many transitions over the past few years in the midst of COVID, and Pastor Karen retiring, and I getting hired and settled in – prior to my arrival, Pastor Karen was preaching a series on thresholds and we have been on a variety of thresholds ever since – discerning the ministries we are called to continue and those we deem appropriate to lay down, rebuilding connections and deepening relationships, tuning into our gifts and abilities and the ways we will bring those to bear in this community and beyond – and this work and the questions related to it all will continue to evolve and unfold. When something new is working itself out, sometimes it takes its sweet time to make itself known. Like any birth, it tends to be messy. It is a kind of mini-apocalypse in which our familiar landmarks disappear, our sources of illumination go dim, our familiar ways of working no longer work.

It can be daunting to stay soul-awake when these mini-apocalypses come along, whether in the discernment process or just in living day to day, which is its own creative art. It can grow wearying to persist in showing up to what is messy, to what is frustrating, to what lies in shadow, to what seems like it isn't going anywhere. Yet as Mark's Gospel reminds us here at the threshold of Advent, such times call us to trust that even in the dark, God is at work, is traveling toward us, has somehow already arrived.

As we enter into Advent, what draws you into the kind of awareness that Jesus describes?