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**Pay Attention**  
**Matthew 24: 36-44**  
**The First Sunday of Advent**  
**December 2, 2007**

There is so much I'd like to share with you that has been bubbling up inside me during the first half of my sabbatical. It is an amazing thing, to me, to be given time to be by myself to read and study, reflect and pray, write and play. To not be ruled by the dictates of clock or calendar is a tremendously liberating thing. I've written a short report on what I've been doing and have experienced during the past two months and if you like, you can pick up a copy in the church office. I also wrote several essays related to what I've been studying and thinking about; the first, an overview of things, is also available from the office. In our personal conversations and smaller group settings, I know I'll have a chance to tell you about much of this – what's happening to my soul, my mind, where the Spirit has been moving in me, and I hope you will tell me what's been happening to you.

Today, however, something much broader and more inclusive than my personal soul journey needs addressing because this is the first Sunday of Advent, this moment in time when each year, we anticipate the coming of the One who is at the heart of our faith, who, in ways well-known and unfamiliar to us, both points us to and shows us what God is like and what human life in this amazing Universe is meant to be. This is the season of waiting, of watching in hope-filled anticipation that the One who is to come is coming, and will be born again in our hearts and in the heart of the world. And for me, what the Advent season is all about can be summed up this way: keep awake, be aware, pay attention.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. As they lay down for the night, Holmes said: "Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson said: "I see millions and millions of stars."

Holmes: "And what does that tell you?"

Watson: "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and that we are a small part of things. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?"

Holmes replied: "Somebody stole our tent."

Paying attention and being aware, isn't just what you look at, it's what you see.

Don't you suppose that this is what Jesus is telling his followers in the Gospel reading? The Lectionary gives us this text or its parallels in Mark or Luke every year the first Sunday in Advent. And it's a strange one, really, an "apocalyptic" passage, very different than the rest of Matthew and the other Gospels. In fact, outside of the book of Revelation and parts of Daniel, we hardly see any of this literature in the Bible. Some Christians take this to be Jesus' prediction that he's going to come in the future from someplace in the heavenly courts and take the people who believe the right things away with him in an event now called "the rapture" (which is something that was unknown to Christian theology for the first 1,800 years of our faith). I have my very strong doubts about this interpretation for about fifty reasons.

Regardless, it is the perfect passage for this day because it calls us to keep awake, be aware and pay attention. Why? Because something amazing is about to happen, something absolutely essential. "You remember Noah, don't you," asks Jesus? "Everybody was going about their business, doing the same old, same old, nose to the grindstone routine, head down not knowing where they were headed, even if they cared to know. But something big was brewing," Jesus reminds them, "something that would radically alter not only their personal lives, but the whole world." Did any besides Noah know what was happening? Did anyone else care? Was anyone paying attention?

"Two are in the field; one is taken," Jesus tells us again; "two are grinding meal, one will be left." What's he talking about here? I don't think he's talking about the end of the world; he's talking about the end of the way things are perceived by our world view and ordered by our human made institutions, and the beginning of something brand new. "So pay attention," he tells us. "Don't let the everyday grind, your busyness, your obsessions with reaching for the stars draw you away from what's right here on Earth, right in front of you. Open your eyes because what is life giving is the One who is right here. Pay attention! Keep awake!"

Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi puts it well:

"The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you really want.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
where the two worlds touch.  
The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep."

Don't you think that is the message of Advent: keep awake, pay attention because, like in the days of Noah, something big is about to happen, something that will change your life, change the world. But it's not like the cataclysm of the Flood where everyone will know what's happening; this something will be noticed only by those who are paying attention with the eyes of the soul wide open, waiting eagerly in tip-toed anticipation. And guess what that something is? It's a baby.

Don't fall asleep, as Rumi urges, because more than ever, in these ever darkening days, the coming of this One will be like a thief – silently, subtly, almost imperceptible. Pay attention, says Jesus, because this is how God works. This is how God is made known.

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I want to suggest a couple of things for your consideration this Advent season (by the way, did you know that the root of the word “consider” means, “with the stars”?). First of all, as we await for Christ to be born in us and in the life of the world, I urge you to pay attention to your soul. That's the greatest gift a sabbatical offers – along with Advent. Please allow the gentle and subtle power of this season crack open your soul, knead it, massage it, so that you will be ready whenever and however the Spirit moves in you. That's not easy to do, I know; especially during Christmastime in this culture, which heaps up so much all around us, it's hard to even find our hearts deepest desire in all the clutter. So, pay attention to what's going on inside of you, and remember that one's outer life is a reflection of the inner life, and what's inside mirrors the outer. Listen to your life, your soul for it is yearning to go deeper into a place where it can know God more intimately and fully, and to become a place where Christ can be born again.

How might you prepare this place? You're going to have to take time and make time during the seasonal madhouse. There's no other way to put it; it is one of the most counter-cultural things any of us can do in the weeks leading up to the celebration of Christ's birth. Clear away a space or spaces so that your soul might breathe deeply of the Spirit of God, right in the midst of this so often chaotic culture of ours. Invite a friend or two for tea and conversation and talk. Talk about what's important to you and to them, what gives you meaning and what unsettles and grieves you. Light candles at night and sit with your spouse or a friend or your children or by yourself and be quiet. Just take it in and let sink in the words of the Fourth Gospel: “The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” Resolve not to go shopping on Sundays during this season. Not only will this help keep down the clutter in your life, but have you ever considered that those working in retail at pretty low wages may not have a choice to be there and would rather spend time with their families or friends sitting quietly with a candle? Listen to music; better yet, make music that brings laughter or tears or both. Go outside on a clear, cold night and look at the stars, those amazing creations millions of light years away and consider this: you are part of that light.

Pay attention. You see, when you make time and take time from the “ordinary” grind of your daily living, you may begin to notice something I found nearly every day on my sabbatical: nothing is ordinary anymore. No person, no event, no plant, no animal, no moment – nothing - is not holy. The challenging thing, I found when I was really paying attention, was not that I had to look for a miracle – the presence of God; it was finding where there isn't one.

Please, please, allow your waiting this Advent season to be holy waiting, that your soul might be opened to the God who is with us. Isn't that what we celebrate – Immanuel, God is with us?