

Sermons at Christ Church

A rise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Advent I
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Gracious God, I pray that when I close my eyes to this world, may your presence nudge me awake. When I am weary and ready to quit, may your passion for this world energize me. When I am hopeless, may your gaze raise me up. When I am afraid, may your love enfold me. When I am angry and want to blame, may your kindness sweep me off my feet. When I am broken and in despair, may your delight make me whole. Amen.

I heard a joke by Steve Harvey. For those of us who do not know him, he is a TV personality and a comedian. In this joke, he wondered about the suggestion that we all need at least eight hours of sleep each day. He said that no rich man sleeps for eight hours. Imagine if you live in Los Angeles, while the Stock Market is in New York City, if you sleep eight hours, how would you know if the market is crushing? By the time you wake up from your eight hour sleep, all your money will be gone. So, stay awake for you do not know when the Son of Man will be coming. Stay awake for you do not know when the thief would come and break into your home. Stay awake, be vigilant, for you do not know when the market would crush. Advent. A season of waiting, a season of anticipation, a season of walking to the house of the Lord our God. And we walk because we know what it is that awaits us in the house of the Lord our God, that house which sits on God's holy mountain.

Our present condition is one of being tired. We are tired by all the news about destruction and wars. We are worn out by the many ills that complicate our lives. Tears, desolation and hopelessness characterize many of our worlds. In the words of some, we are tired of being tired. Like the ancient Israelites who had seen Zion burnt down and destroyed by their adversaries. Like the ancient Israelites who languish in exile, we too are in exile of sorts. We appear incapable of extricating ourselves from all the stuff that dehumanizes us and others, stuff that brings misery and tears to us and others. Our deep social ills have turned lives upside down and run down others into obscurity and meaninglessness. We ache deep within us. We wonder, why? Why is our world often all too scary, desolate and dangerous?

And then comes Advent, a season where God assures us of His coming to soothe our worries and pain, a season of walking to the house of the Lord our God. And we walk to God's holy mountain because we embrace the idea that we are a part of something larger than ourselves.

We are not the only ones in the picture-however beautiful or ugly that picture may be, nor is the picture only about us-however, uplifting or heart wrenching that picture may be. Whatever the nature of the picture may be, it is about a future, God's future of making things perfect and whole, where you and I know that we are part of something larger than ourselves.

There's a story of Roger, a homeless man who slept most nights in a portal of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. He seemed like a hopeless case. In fact one person remarked that Roger was beyond repair. He was offered a place at a local homeless shelter but declined to move there because he argued that he didn't feel safe there. The staff at Grace reluctantly let Roger be.

One day, the Dean received a mail, in the envelop was a beautiful meticulous drawing of the old cathedral house and a note: "I thought you might like this. My name is Roger. I'm the homeless person sleeping in the North Portal." The Dean upon reading the note, decided to provide some resources to help Roger with art supplies. Roger is now a full time artist. The point is that Roger made a choice to reach out with his art. Yes, he decided to take that walk to God's holy mountain. The dean later asked him, what kept you going? Roger responded that "I held on to my art because it connects me with something larger than myself. All I needed were pencils and paper to be transported to a world where I wasn't just a homeless guy looking for a meal and shower. I was part of something bigger. And when I sent that picture to you, I knew I was part of a community." Yes, the community that thrives because it sits on God's holy mountain.

Like the ancient Israelites in exile our desire has always been about a new beginning, a new relationship that takes into account all our suffering and collapses them into a new hope and expectation for ourselves and others. But more than that, we desire a new relationship that is shaped and nurtured by our walk with God, the kind of walk that assures us that we are part of something much larger than ourselves.

The prophet Isaiah believed that the people can indeed be a part of something larger than themselves, and so with that thought in mind, he casts a broader vision that can only be made possible by our desired walk to the house of the Lord our God, that house which sits on God's holy mountain.

On that mountain, nations known for war will come, not with the intent to conquer or plunder, but to learn the ways of God, to learn how to walk in God's light. On that mountain, enemies, and not children will gather, for that is where all will turn their swords and weapons of war into ploughsheds.

On that mountain, adversaries will turn their spears of battle into pruning hooks. For, on that mountain we will all come to see ourselves as being part of something larger than ourselves.

We will come to know that our task is to find each other's balloon, to build each up into matured Christians, to support each other to achieve their fullest potential and to live in the peace of God. The prophet's vision represents a kind of transformation that is only possible on God's holy mountain. Advent. A season of walking to the house of the Lord our God, that house that sits on God's holy mountain.

To walk is to be active. It is to stay awake. It is to be vigilant. Our new Health Ministry is presently inviting people to sign up to walk, run or bike. These are all physical activities for which you have to be awake to be engaged in. In the prophet's vision, walking stands as a metaphor for conduct and a commitment to a moral path. In the words of Paul, it is about putting on the armor of light. Remember, the light that shines in the darkness and that darkness could not comprehend. For us, we do not walk for nothing. We walk up to the mountain of the Lord because that is where we are taught the precepts of the Lord, that is where we learn the language of peace and the art of being a part of something larger than ourselves.

To walk is to be aware that salvation is much nearer to us than when we first believed. For that reason, says Paul, we cannot stay asleep-the rich man doesn't sleep for eight hours. The problem with the church in Rome was that although the gift of the Holy Spirit had been received, many had fallen asleep. In other words, they are diverted from their walk to the mountain. They have been distracted from the walk to the mountain. The work to which the Holy Spirit calls us has fallen by the wayside because we have been distracted by the cares of the world. The point Paul seeks to make is that we cannot, after receiving the gift of salvation be asleep. You must stay awake, and not only that but to also lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. That is to say, you must keep walking. Advent. A season of walking to the house of the Lord our God. That house which sits on God's holy mountain and where we learn the ways of God.

In the gospel story, we get a glimpse of the apprehension of the disciples about the fulfillment of God's purposes. When will all this happen? As part of his answer, Jesus invokes the story of Noah and simply reminds them to stay awake, be vigilant. Mainly because we do not know when all this would come to pass, we have to keep walking.

The good news is that the one who lives in the light isn't worried about the when-in fact he or she isn't worried at all. For that person isn't motivated by God's timing to act as one who wears the armor of light.

That person, you and I have to be motivated by the simple desire that we are part of something much larger than ourselves, and for that reason we have to be always awake in the light, labor in the light, worship in the light and walk in the light for we do not know when the Son of Man will come, but we must be ready whenever He chooses to come. Amen.