

Kept awake by love

December 1, 2009

In spite of my best intentions, somewhere around Halloween my ability to stay on top of things begins to unravel. It gets more and more difficult to wake up before the sun and harder to meet all the demands of each day, or even of the previous day. As things left undone accumulate and the hours of daylight diminish, a kind of lethargy sets in. I can feel it seep into the lives of everyone in my household, making it hard to start preparing homework or grade papers or cook a healthy meal. Even our cats seem to feel it, preferring to remain curled up on the couch like little cat doughnuts rather than bounding to the door to greet us.

So when the first candle is lit and the voices of Advent sing out across the church—Wake up! It's time to begin again!—it feels like the most graceful invitation I have ever heard.

This, to me, is one of the greatest gifts of Christian life: that God never tires of offering us the opportunity to begin again. Advent reminds us that the kingdom announced by John the Baptist, the kingdom that has “come near,” is not like a train we either catch on its way through town or miss forever. The kingdom of heaven is more like a comet that blazes regularly into view, lighting up the sky and taking our breath away.

It's hard not to view time as an oppressive force, something to work against, something to stay ahead of, something to manage. But surely that is not God's intention; surely God means for time to be a sign of God's hope in us, God's confidence that we can change. With each new year, God extends to us a fresh opportunity to become the people God intends us to be, to try again to be guided by love and mercy, to crave justice, be present to others, and to live fully awake to God's presence. As one year gives away to another, we are invited to give way—to seek forgiveness, or to offer it, and to turn toward the mountain of God where weapons of war are reshaped as tools of human flourishing and violent ways are unlearned.

The prophetic voices of Advent reach us in our lethargy and urge us to wake up and get moving, to travel inward toward greater understanding of the world inside us and outward toward a deeper engagement with the world all around us. In Advent, we are called to beat our swords into plowshares *and* to wait in patience. To walk in the light of the Lord and to rest in darkness. To resist injustice and to keep silent before mysteries we cannot fully understand. The prophetic voices of Advent remind us that the way in and the way out are the same way, that the life inside of us and the life all around us are animated by the same source.

The woman in the Song of Songs is not among the prophetic voices to which we usually tune our ears during Advent, but if you're looking for a prayer to carry you into the darkness of these days, read the second verse of the fifth chapter. As the woman lies in her bed, separated from her beloved, she sings, "I slept, but my heart was awake." Even while sleeping, something inside of her is wakeful, some part of her is listening for the sound of her lover's knock at her door.

I slept, but my heart was awake. This quiet little sentence gets at something true about us, I think. Even when we feel more scattered than present in our own lives, even when we have let our world shrink to the size of our to-do list, even when we are asleep, some part of us is awake and waiting. No matter how tiny, no matter how hidden, God greets and addresses us in this hidden place during Advent—that part of us that stays awake longing and listening, and reaching out for God even when the rest is too distracted to notice. In Advent, we are invited to learn to be led by our wakeful hearts, to nudge our inner and outer lives into closer alignment, to be kept awake by love.

This invitation does not come just once a year, of course. It comes with each new week, with each new day, with each new moment. It comes to us in what St. Teresa of Ávila once called the interior castle and what St. Catherine of Siena called the cell of self-knowledge. It comes to us in our relationships and in our bodies and in the world through which our bodies move. And it comes to us in the life of Jesus, whose story we prepare to enter once more from the beginning. Jesus, whose life was so wholly awake, whose inner and outer lives matched so completely that his one life promised new life for us all.