

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
November 28, 2010
Romans 13:11-14

“...unreadied by sloth”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Today is the first Sunday in Advent and the long, slow slide into Christmas has begun....at least in my life. By that I don't mean a growing sense of anticipation, joy and wonder at the birth of the Christ child; and I don't mean an increasing sense of gratitude for the birth of a baby who would gather a rag-tag group of followers and change the world; and I don't mean the building excitement surrounding Jesus' birth in a lowly stable signaling right from the start that the messiah was a nonviolent, not powerful peasant—not a warrior or a politician.

The long slow slide into Christmas that has already begun in my life, I regret to say, is the numbing sloth that accompanies this season. It is true. I enjoyed a too-large feast the day before Thanksgiving when Michael made a big ham dinner for my Mom and Kathy, and I enjoyed a too-large feast ON Thanksgiving with turkey and all the fixings, and somehow (and it is a little unclear how I could have done this) I enjoyed a too-large feast overflowing with goodies on the day AFTER Thanksgiving.

Plus my sharp eyes have spotted the egg nog in Stop and Shop—there is a special case for the egg nog near the dairy, butter, milk section—and my cart seems to have a mind of its own. It is all I can do to wrestle my cart past the egg nog cartons and NOT grab one, two or three and then bust one open in the parking lot and drink it right from the container.

And the shopping. Dear Lord. My partner Michael and I swore we would have nothing to do with Black Friday. But our coffee machine broke last week and we love coffee, and Macy's advertised 40% off on coffee machines the day after Thanksgiving and that is such a savings. And so lo and behold without really thinking about it we found ourselves at the Holyoke Mall the day after Thanksgiving, on line at Macy's with all the other shoppers buying big box items like good little consumers. And as we made our way out of Macy's, Michael somehow saw a sports jacket he needed and I saw candles and towels that I needed.

The long, slow slide into Christmas has begun. This is the season when many people eat too much, shop too much, drink too much, wrap too much, party too much and wake up on Christmas day in a kind of stupor...bloated, tired, lethargic and dazed.

I know this is true. And I am a likely candidate to over-indulge from now until Christmas. And so it really caught my eye when I took a book off my shelf, searching for some Advent inspiration, and I read a simple prayer that named my problem and asked for God's help. The book, by David Slater, is called Before the Amen: Creative Resources for Worship. This is Slater's Advent prayer:

Tender Christ, in this sacred meantime, guard our hearts and prepare our minds, so that we may wait creatively, not distracted by the obligations of the season, nor unready by sloth. Prepare us, that at your coming we may recognize you and rejoice in your appearing. Grant us the courage to pray as people who believe in your appearing.

Slater's words grabbed me by the throat...he is asking "tender Christ" to guard our hearts and prepare our minds so that we may wait not distracted by obligations nor **UNREADY BY SLOTH**. Perfect I thought. I need to get a grip NOW or I am going to arrive on Christmas morning "unready by sloth."

I love that Slater made up that word..."unready."
And I love that he names what will happen to us in this season unless we guard against it: sloth. We will be "unready by sloth."
Slater had me in mind when he wrote this prayer.

And it seems Paul had me in mind when he wrote to the early Christians in Rome some 2,000 years ago. Paul knew that I could numb out this season and rise on Christmas morning unready by sloth.

Listen again to the passage from Romans which is our reading for today:
... you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul is right....for me and maybe for you if this season is a time when you over-indulge...now is the moment for us to wake up from sleep. Now is the time for us to be fully awake.

But being fully awake during Advent is hard.

All the messages we receive in our culture throughout December will be to eat lavishly, shop endlessly, drink frequently, smoke mindlessly, and party recklessly...until we enter a kind of dulled, doped, dreary state of disengagement. Along the way, as we anesthetize our body, mind and spirit, we will lose Jesus, lose the sense of joy and wonder of Advent, and lose the real meaning of Christmas. We will over-do and become slow, stuffed, and smothered.

Oh my beloved sisters and brothers, we need to buck the tide.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent and we have the opportunity to take to heart the words of Paul, ancient words of wisdom that carry meaning today...

... you know what time it is...it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.

For the night is far gone, the day is near...

let us live honorably...not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

How counter-cultural, how radical, how extraordinary it would be to NOT gratify the desires of the flesh during December, not to become dull and drowsy but to WAKE from sleep and move through Advent with a commitment to prepare for Christmas through meditation and prayer, maybe fasting and contemplation. What a remarkable thing it would be to journey through Advent fully awake—reveling not in parties and glitter, feasts and fashions, but reveling in the quiet message of this time. What an amazing thing it would be to move through this season fully awake...maybe then we would turn away from the hoopla, maybe we would not be dazzled by the bargains, maybe we could avoid drinking gallons of egg nog and eating dozens of candy-canes.

When I imagine being fully awake, aware and alive during this Advent season, I imagine feeling pure, whole and cleansed on Christmas morning. Imagining a very different Advent this year has made me recall the words of author Harold Whitman who said: “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive...because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Maybe what Christianity needs is people who come alive during Advent—people who refuse to shop too much, eat too much, drink too much, smoke too much, and party too much.

Whitman says that what the world needs is people who have come alive. Maybe what our faith needs is people who come alive during Advent rather than turning into sleep-walking zombies who go from overly rich meals to overly crowded malls.

Maybe this year we could swim against the current...instead of being stuffed with Christmas cookies we could savor the sweetness of the Christmas story.

Maybe we could be surprised again that people prayed for a savior who would lead them to victory over the oppressive Roman Empire that occupied their land and stripped them of their dignity....and they got a helpless child born to a poor, unwed teenage mother.

Maybe if our senses were not overwhelmed and dulled we could be touched again by the image of the stable and the manger and the Shepherds low, so very low on the social hierarchy of importance, there first to kneel before the infant boy.

Maybe if we were in our right minds and not sleep-walking through the season, we could light one simple candle and mark the birthday of a child who grew to be a man who we experience still today, a being who shapes our lives, inspires, comforts and guides us.

Maybe if we were fully awake throughout Advent we could see Jesus in the face of street musician singing off-key in front of Thorne's Marketplace or the homeless woman asking for change outside Brueger's Bagel Deli.

Maybe if we were sober and rested and hungry and thoughtful and empty we would get down on one knee and speak to Jesus in quiet tones, thanking him for giving our lives meaning and being our brother and friend.

Maybe if we were fully awake we would feel Jesus' imminent presence and weep as we sang

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
and order all things, far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and cause us in her ways to go.*

Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

You have heard me tell you before that there is an expression in clergy circles that pastors always give the sermon THEY need to hear. Well, I have done it again.

I have just preached the sermon I need to hear. I am trusting and hoping that at least one person present today needed to hear this message as well.

I will say to you now with all honesty and vulnerability that this year, I do not want to wake up on Christmas morning “unreadied by sloth.”

I want to move through THIS Advent season fully awake.

Awake to the awe,
Awake to the delight,
Awake to the mystery,
Awake to the gratitude,
Awake to the symbolism,
Awake to the simplicity,
Awake to the beauty,
Awake to the thankfulness,
Awake to the wonder,
Awake to the power of the birth of Jesus.

Sloth COULD win this Advent Season. Sloth has won many Advents in the past.

But not this year.

When we gather on Christmas Eve, and we make a big circle around this Sanctuary, and you are all holding your little white candles, and Kathy turns off the overhead lights and we pass the flame from the Christ candle around the whole circle, I intend to be fully awake.

I am making a pledge today and you are my witnesses. My pledge is that this Advent I intend to be a clear vessel of God’s love and grace. When Christmas arrives, I am not going to be unreadied by sloth. I intend to be filled with the Spirit.

Will you join me in making this pledge?

Then on Christmas Eve, we will sing together, like never before...

*Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories steam from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth. Amen.*