

The Sunnybrook's Pulpit

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Wake Up!

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

– Matthew 24:36-44

A few years ago, we had a few days of bitterly cold weather. One night I noticed it was a bit drafty in my house and put on a sweater. A couple of hours later I noticed that even with the sweater it felt cold and checked the temperature. It was twelve degrees in my house and the thermostat was set at fifteen. Oh-oh! The furnace was out! The temperature outside was minus thirty-two degrees! And it was now close to midnight!

I tinkered with the furnace a little bit, but there was nothing I could do, so I got on the phone. The furnace was less than a year old and still under warranty, so I tried the company which sold us the furnace. They were polite, but firm. They were not making any more calls that night. Their service repair man had been working twenty hours a day for four days straight and he needed a few hours of sleep. I asked what I was supposed to do. The house would be frozen up by morning. “Do you have a fireplace? Light a fire.” After hanging up, I thought about that for a while. I knew how to build a fire, but we hadn’t lit a fire in the fireplace in years. We had gotten rid of all our firewood two years before and hadn’t missed it since. Where would I get wood? I looked around our living and dining room. We had an oak dining room set. Oak burns well! But maybe I would use that as a last resort! I checked the thermostat again. It was eleven degrees now.

I checked the Yellow Pages. There was one other furnace company in the area. I got an answering machine. “It’s getting cold in here,” I said. “Please phone me back.” Then I crawled into bed, with a couple of extra blankets, and tried to go to sleep, wondering how cranky the cat might get when she got cold.

Around two in the morning, I got a phone call from a furnace repair guy named Rob. He was just finishing another call in Red Deer and would be out to Lacombe right away. He got there around two thirty, and found the

problem right away. We were using the wrong filters, which caused the furnace to overheat, and a safety switch to fail. He replaced the filter and the switch and soon a very welcome blue flame appeared in the burner. While he worked, we talked. Rob had been working since six that morning, and he was looking forward to going home to bed when he was done with us. This had been going on since the start of the cold weather. He was tired, but polite and friendly. I thanked him profusely and happily paid him the extra charge for coming out so late at night. He deserved every penny. He left at three. I went to bed. So, I hope, did he!

I have always taken my furnace, and the people who repair them, for granted. But early on that November morning, I was very anxious for the advent of a furnace repair man. Without him, we would have had to move in with our neighbours and hope the cat wouldn't get too cranky and the pipes wouldn't freeze. Early that morning, I was very much aware of my need for a deliverer. He saved us from a cold, uncomfortable night, and possibly from getting clawed by a cranky cat.

Most of the time, I am pretty comfortable. I feel little need for someone to save me. The furnace works, there is food in the fridge, clean water comes out of the tap, and I live in one of the safest, most prosperous countries on earth. I can't complain. I count my blessings.

And yet, for all kinds of reasons, the world is not as God intends it to be, our lives are not as God intends them to be. If we were to make a list of all the ways in which our lives and our world fall short of what God intends, we would have to include: drugs and depression, hunger and homelessness, cancer and climate change, power-hungry politicians, pollution and polio, corruption, crime and cholera, loneliness and loss of habitat, just to name a few. The world is not as God intends it to be.

But we are an adaptable species. We can get used to pretty much everything. When I thought it was getting a bit colder in the house, I adapted. I put on an extra sweater. It took me a couple of hours to wake up and realize that something was wrong. I adapted. And we all do that. Kids who grow up with an alcoholic parent adapt and grow up thinking that is normal. Women who have learned to live with abuse think of it as in some way normal. When most of the men in your community spend time in jail, as is true of many minority communities, boys grow up thinking that is normal and they can expect to

spend time there too. Like the proverbial frog who will sit in a pan of warming water until it boils to death, we can adapt and adapt and adapt. Most people, as Martin Luther King once said, are like thermometers that adapt to the temperature of majority opinion, rather than thermostats that transform the temperature of society.

The New Testament uses the metaphor of sleep to refer to people who adapt and adapt and adapt. Most of us, like the disciples in Gethsemane are constantly in danger of falling asleep, being entranced by conformity to what most people think is normal. Sleeping means to adapt and keep on adapting, accepting as normal what we should never accept as normal. Waking up, on the other hand, and staying awake, is to stop adapting and start transforming. It's about refusing to accept our cold and heartless world as it is and start making it warm again. Jesus regularly tells his followers to wake up, and to stay awake, because the stupefying effects of conformity are constantly lulling us back to sleep.

People who have adapted to an unjust and corrupt world have no hope, because they do not even know that anything is wrong. They do not realize that they need to hope because they think it is normal for children to go hungry, and women to be abused and aboriginal people to be imprisoned at a rate several times the national average. They think it is normal for politicians to manipulate public opinion through attack ads and for CEOs and professional athletes to take home in a year what most of us might make in a lifetime.

Advent is a time to wake up and realize that it isn't normal, and it isn't right, and it isn't just. Advent is a time for people who have gotten used to an unjust and corrupt world to remember that we need hope. Advent is a time to look forward to a better world. Advent is a time to realize that it is cold in here and that something is wrong and that something can be done about it. Advent is a time to hope.

The reading from Matthew's gospel expresses hope through the strange language of apocalypse. The word *apocalypse* is a Greek word which literally means "a lifting of the veil," a "revelation of something secret." Apocalyptic texts are visions of the future. They use bizarre imagery of a coming day of God, a time when injustice will be swept away and God's kingdom will be established on earth. But the purpose of apocalyptic is not to predict what

will happen, but to reveal how far things have gone wrong in the present. Apocalyptic emerges from situations of radical injustice, when people know that the way things are is so unfair that the only way for justice to come is through something like a revolution, a complete overhaul of the way things are. Apocalyptic is for people who know that the system is unjust, and who need a saviour if anything is to change. They know the system is broken and they need a repairman.

Jesus started a non-violent revolution, a movement of social transformation, and it was the advent of this movement to which I think this passage from Matthew was pointing. Some people will get swept up in this movement and some will be left behind. Two people will be working in a field when the call to join the movement comes; one will respond to that call, and the other will keep on adapting and conforming. Two women will be grinding grain when the revolution sweeps through their compound and one will keep on adapting and conforming, but the other will join the movement.

You won't know when this movement will happen, Jesus says, but it is coming. How and why movements happen is mysterious and unpredictable, like the weather. It will sweep through your community like a winter storm. We know the weather will get cold in the winter and that eventually a storm will hit but we don't know when. But if you are ready, then whenever it comes, you will be ready.

How do you get ready for the coming of justice, the coming of God's kingdom? You wake up and shake off your sleepiness. You stop being conformed to this present age and you allow yourself to be transformed by hope. You get ready for an age of justice by waking up to injustice and you start acting justly. You get ready for an age of peace by shaking off the conformity to violence and you awaken to peaceful action. "There is no way to peace, the old saying goes. Rather peace is the way." There is no way to justice. Rather, justice is the way. There is no way to hope. Rather hope is the way.

So Jesus says, "wake up!" Stop adapting. Stop sleepwalking through life. Stop living in this world as if it is normal and acceptable. Stop going through the motions and decide to really live! Wake up and live your life to the fullest. Wake up and join the movement of the human one! Wake up and live in hope! Amen!