

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Yogi Berra, the great Yankees catcher and master of malapropisms was once asked by Mickey Mantle, “Yogi, what time is it?” Berra’s response was, “You mean right NOW?” Let us take this opportunity to ponder what time it is now; what it means to be “awakened out of sleep”; to see our lives and our time on this little orb as moments with the God who is present in history and among His people. Is time merely the “eternal return of the same” as Nietzsche commented, or is it headed somewhere? How does this moment participate in God’s motions? Advent, the beginning of awakening, reminds us that “right now” is the time between what God has done in Jesus, and what is still in the process of being completed.

This term ‘awakened’ has all sorts of connotations. The buddha referred to it as being ever alert. Kant commented that his philosophy occurred when he was ‘awakened’ from his dogmatic slumbers. Being neither as bright or erudite as either of them, let me suggest another take on it. Have you ever been utterly surprised in a blink of the eye by what has gone unnoticed previously? You are startled out of sleep by the sudden realization that you have forgotten a very important task or appointment. Fifty years ago this past Friday we were walking down Church Street in Nashville and stopped at a crosswalk when an old classmate approached and greeted us. I spoke for a second and then made an introduction saying, “This is Jo Stanley”!! A quick elbow in the ribs and I corrected the mistake, “I mean Jo Menees, my wife!” Married the day before, it still struck with a sudden reality that life had changed. You likely have your own awakening stories, and it means that we become aware that in this moment life is different and perhaps enhanced. St. Paul calls us to see that in Jesus God has provided a new moment in which we live, and move, and have full being.

This is a curious experience on our part if you will consider it because the only moment we have is the present one. The past is not retrievable, save in our memories, and cannot be altered by us. The future can be only anticipated, and while we plan for it assiduously, it is always marked by uncertainty. It is this moment, only, where active and aware living can occur. It is in the NOW where our relationships with one another and God can be noticed, affected, and enriched. It is in the NOW-this minute-where the quality of those relationships is nurtured, developed, and tended. To dawdle anywhere else is at the very least, wasteful, and worse, precarious.

St. Paul in his letter to the Church at Rome begins with phrases we recognize well. He frames life with the Great Commandment, with the truly important things in everyday life, and calls us out from darkness, to become aware of this moment as the time and place where God is most present to us. We often say that we are distracted. What we mean is that our attention and focus has been moved from one thing to another or to many. This is at least in part what Paul means when he uses the term darkness. It is living as if any and all things are as important as any other thing. It is a kind of losing our way from what is at the heart of life as a Christian, our awareness of God with us, and treating other actions or items as if they were on equal footing with God.

The simple and clear truth is this is not a difficult thing to have happen for any of us. We are surrounded by a world and culture that makes it our business to deal with what we can see, touch, manipulate, control, and predict. These are the skills and perspectives that help us “get on” in this life, and we would be handicapped without them. BUT, God is not on the same footing. As Martin Luther rightly points out, any God who is not hidden from our normal ways of seeing is no God at all. In fact, God may appear to us and be described rightly as the God who seems absent by all regular means of describing presence—He is elusive in a very real sense. The holy can be experienced only in faithful watchful alert waiting. There is an analog in everyday life. A certain philosophy instructor tells of teaching a course in the Philosophy of Religion. Sitting on the front row of class was a young student, Stephen, who was a perennial challenger of everything. No session went by without an impossible question or comment added to the lectures. One day, when the topic was the role of faith, Stephen promptly threw the gauntlet down by stating emphatically, “I don’t believe in anything I cannot see”. The battle was on!! The instructor replied with a question—“Do you believe in love”? Of course, came the reply, “I see it in the actions between people like my parents; they treat each other with great affection and care”. “How do you know it is love and not mere convenience to keep peace in the house” asked the teacher? Stephen was perplexed by this addition to the debate. “I am not sure” he finally conceded. The suggestion was offered to him that actions can only be seen as love if two people believe in one another and their intentions. In short, it is a matter of ultimate trust in one another, hiding behind the surface actions, that interprets those actions as authentic love. It is faithful patient watching and tending to the relationship that allows any of us to receive the gifts others offer us as love.

The story of wise and foolish virgins, one of the parables of judgment, which is the reading for Evening Prayer tonight, beckons us to listen and place ourselves within the story. It asks that question, “Do you notice anything different” in your living in light of your faith in God? All 10 of them are included from the beginning. No one is excluded, except by their failure to watch faithfully. The lack of faith is not in failing to intellectually believe that the Bridegroom will come. They all accept that as a given. It is rather not nurturing the faith in someone—trusting in the One who promises a presence. When the Bridegroom says to the 5 foolish virgins, “I do not know you”, it is not a lack of intellectually knowing they are there, but the lack of a relationship which is being stated. The judgment is pointing out that nothing seems different in light of God’s saving grace and love. The doing of nothing is what is being condemned. The question this parable places in front of us is why should we be so foolish as to go on living in terms of things that are not real and have no lasting power? Faith is trusting in the relationship God has made with us in Christ, taking him at his word about what is real, and trying our best to get all the unreal nonsense out of the way.

Today we enter Advent, the beginning of a new church year, and the beginning anew for us of a journey with God. We are called to take stock of what we count as real and of true value. It is a time of waiting and watching for those signs of the Lord’s presence behind the surface events of life. There are many different types of waiting—some wasteful and some useful. There is waiting marked by impatience and frustration. It is that type in which we drum our fingers on the counter while others move too slowly for our liking. There is the waiting of anxiety, when a medical test is to come with either bad or good news, and we battle with fear and hope in equal measure. There is the waiting that comes from sloth and distraction. It is a means of wasting time by taking no action to prepare for things of importance, like expecting others to change their behavior so that we can be happy or comforted. But the waiting and watching of Advent is a time of actively

honing our attention. It is a kind of preparation where our focus is on our relationship with the God in whom we place our trust, hope, and our ultimate destiny. And it readies us to recognize the Lord, who hidden behind everyday events is present and calling us to live not with darkness and useless things, but with what is real. “Have you ever been surprised in life by the sudden awareness of beauty, goodness, or truth”?

The 18th century curmudgeon, Dr. Samuel Johnson, wrote the following prayer in response to this parable. “Almighty God, in whose hands are all the powers of man; who gives understanding, and takes it away; who, as it seems good unto Thee, enlightens the thoughts of the simple, and darkens the meditations of the wise, be present with me in my studies and enquiries. Grant, O Lord, that I may not lavish away the life which Thou hast given me on useless trifles, nor waste it in vain searches after things which Thou has hidden from me. Enable me, by thy Holy Spirit, so to shun sloth and negligence, that every day may discharge part of the task which Thou hast allotted me; and so further with thy help that labour which, without thy help, must be ineffectual, that I may obtain, in all my undertakings, such success as will most promote thy glory, and the salvation of my own soul, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen+