



***A sermon preached by The Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, Bishop of Maine to the Episcopal Diocese of Maine for the First Sunday in Advent  
November 29, 2020***

Years ago when I was teaching a confirmation class, two middle-school brothers (twins, actually) taught me a concept about keeping time. It's one that many of you know, but it was new to me! When they were little, and wound up about their birthday or Christmas or the first day of school, their parents taught them to count the number of 'sleeps'. "Two more sleeps until we go camping," "Four more sleeps until Grandma comes." Concrete, understandable, and measurable.

Mark Spahr, who many of us know as the editor of our pre-recorded diocesan-wide liturgies, posted on Facebook on May 9th (I know that was a long time ago), he posted that day because it snowed - quite a lot actually. And he had a photograph of his front yard in Winterport and the caption read: "Go home 2020, you're drunk." It was so spot-on, and here we are nine months into pandemic tide, utterly certain of very little except that we are inexorably changed.

Time and rhythm are disrupted, and new. Now we wear masks and keep six feet apart. How many of us have watched old TV shows in the past few months, only to stop short when it dawned on us that the characters are hugging and shaking hands and sitting next to each other, singing, and gathering for parties.

Maybe unlike every other first Sunday in Advent, this year when we hear Jesus telling his disciples to keep awake, maybe we're not so surprised because, well, actually because we are wide awake. We're looking for a vaccine. We're worried about loved ones who are isolated. We're praying for healthcare workers and others who are on the front lines. We're scheduling yet another family Zoom reunion, adapting to a new way of being the church.

Right now it's hard to imagine being anything but awake. And still, our Lord's words are part of a longer bit about end times, and a particular moment, too. Jesus and his disciples had left the temple and he told them someday that it would be thrown down - that not one stone would be left upon another. The disciples want to know when this will happen. They are confused, and only slightly assured to know that the Son of Man will come someday to restore all things. No one knows, not even the Son, when this will occur but take place it will.

In the midst of all the turmoil of this year and most likely the year to come, God may be saying to you and me: "Rely on Me." If we can get a grip on the good news that God is already coming to us, already coming to take away our fear, to remind us that God is God and we are not, then the broken promises and broken hearts of 2020 become signs pointing us toward the truth of Jesus Christ who says: "Keep awake."

Tom and I have a tradition of lighting our Advent wreath as grace before supper. We sing the first stanza of *O Come O Come Emmanuel*. God will show us how to do so again this year, keeping us awake to see an end to sinful strife. It will be a season of smaller things than prior years. No big family gatherings, no Christmas open house. Instead, we'll take delight in seeing donated new toys from Aroostook county distributed throughout Maine through St. Elizabeth's in Portland and Seeds of Hope in Biddeford and St. Anne's in Windham, among other places. And we will fill a stocking for an eleven-year-old boy whose name we'll never know. They're gestures that keep us awake, and may keep hope alive.

This Advent wreath, which Tom makes every year, and our daily ritual, shows us how this year leads us to trust God's unfailing providence and presence. So, my friends, maybe 2020 isn't drunk after all. The word Advent means coming, and so we light the candles in trust and in hope that Jesus Christ is always with us. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Coming to meet us in every future. Deep in our hearts, we have a faith that shows us who God is and what God does.

Keep awake. Look to the future. And if that's too much to grasp, well, then consider the glorious promise that in just 26 more sleeps, we'll arise to say, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come."