

## **Advent 1 A 2010**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 28, 2010

Matthew 24:36-44

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

A new church year begins today, a year that we might call *The Year of St. Matthew*. Because many of our gospel readings this year will come from Matthew.

And one of the things about Matthew is that he uses sleeping as a metaphor. He uses being awake as a metaphor. In his metaphor, being asleep is a kind of spiritual disease. And being awake is the healthy and right kind of spirituality. Don't be asleep, be awake, Matthew says, metaphorically. And so it is appropriate to begin this new church year, this *Year of St. Matthew* by singing the hymn *Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying!* A hymn based upon a parable in Matthew's gospel, a parable which ends with Jesus saying: *Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

So what does Matthew have against sleep, anyway? In what ways is sleep like the wrong way of life? In what ways is sleep like being turned away from God? I suppose, chiefly, that dreaming is something like our lives without God. My dream at night is literally my own reality. A world I created, with its own pleasures and its own monsters. And that is something like our actual lives where we tend to live according to our own wishes and our own fears, without checking in with God's reality.

So dreams are one part of the metaphor for spiritual weakness. And. When we are asleep, we are vulnerable. Jesus uses the image of a thief breaking in at night. While we are in a dream, evil takes place. While we aren't paying attention, evil forces can do their work.

The opposite of being asleep is being awake. In what ways is being awake like being spiritually healthy? Surely, the characteristic of being awake is that we are conscious. We are aware of ourselves and the people and the things around us. Spiritually, we are conscious of God. We are aware of his presence, of his mercy, of his justice. We are mindful. We are attentive. We are perceptive. Jesus urges us to be this way regarding the things of God. Not asleep. But awake. The Apostle Paul uses the same metaphor in the letter we heard moments ago. *It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.*

The great Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick used to put forward this question. Imagine that the neurologists and psychologists and computer programmers have created a machine. And you can hook your brain up to that machine and live in a world of perpetual pleasure. That machine will give you all your fantasies, all your desires, all of happiness, for as long as you are alive. You would live in a make-believe world, but a world of pure, unadulterated happiness. Would you do it? (Some of you science fiction fans know that Professor Nozick's idea has been used very successfully

in the movies.)

Advent– the beginning of the church year, the summons to prepare for Christmas– has a penitential nature to it. To wake up and live in God’s reality. There are times when I hate waking up. It’s usually if I’m having good dreams, and the day ahead is full of stress and toil. But there are also times when waking up is a relief– especially in the case of nightmares. The call to return to God– a call we will hear especially from John the Baptizer next week– can make you unhappy or it can give you peace. It depends what kind of dream you’ve been having.

We need Advent more than ever because of the secularization and commercialization of the Christmas season. Isn’t it amazing that our national economy centers on “Black Friday” shopping? It’s as though the world wants to go to sleep and dream now more than ever. The alarm clock goes off in January when the bills come in, and the scale shows that you’ve gained five pounds, and the weather is even worse, and you have to go back to school or work. We want it to be a magical time of year, a time of reunions and joy, and to be like a Norman Rockwell painting. But if we’re not careful, we’ll be exploited by the commercial cultural machine that threatens to turn us all into tranquilized consumers.

I’m not allowed to tell you the true Christmas story on Christmas Eve, so I’ll tell it to you now. Mary and Joseph and the baby are surrounded by candles. And they are being serenaded by shepherds singing “Holy infant so tender and mild.” “Sleep in heavenly peace.” And so the gentle, tender, mild baby falls asleep. And Mary falls asleep. And Joseph falls asleep. And everyone sleeps in heavenly peace.

And what happens? Do they get up on Christmas morning for bacon and waffles? No. Matthew says an angel appears to Joseph in his dream. And says what? “Get up!” *Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.* And Herod’s men murder every male infant and toddler. That tender and mild baby is a threat. A threat to all the world’s powers, to what one of our scriptures last week called “*things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or power.*” Those things will be conquered by this little baby, and that’s why their first reaction is to murder him. That’s the story that I can’t tell you by candlelight on Christmas Eve. But it’s part of the bigger story.

What does it mean to be spiritually awakened at this time of year? It means that we stay conscious of God. More than ever, we need to know the God of the Bible, not the God that we might dream up in our dreams. Being spiritually awakened means being ready for the light of Christ and the peace of Christ to break into our lives unexpectedly. And to understand that light and peace are sometimes a threat to the dark powers, the thieves who break in and steal from those who slumber. Being spiritually awakened means giving up the false sentimentality that profits our commercial society and instead participating in the true hope and the true promises of God that come with the baby in Bethlehem. Amen.