1 December 2019: Choral Matins with the University Sermon for Advent Sunday
The First Sunday of Advent
Micah 4:1–7, 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11
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So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Wake up! WAKE UP! Not words that are usually needed at the beginning of a sermon…but who knows if they’ll be needed at the end. Wake up!

This is the call on Advent Sunday, to fling off the night, to rise, let the light in, and lift up our hearts. An alarm bell, calling us to rise-up from our slumbers in this liturgy of morning praise.

The words ‘wake up’ as a command- imply there is something to wake up for. This day like every other, is pregnant with possibility. Change is coming. Something is going to happen. We are expectant and waiting. Christian’s have always been people of the morning- attentive to the sun rising on the horizon, aware of the light breaking through glass, listening as the morning chorus of birdsong heralds another new beginning.

Whatever time you get up in the morning, to be a Christian is to be someone who is awake, alive, and risen indeed.

Throughout the scriptures, sleep is often conflated with death. Jesus says to his disciples at the grave of Lazarus his friend- ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep but I am going there to awaken him’. It was early in the morning, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, when whisper of another resurrection woke the women who went to tomb…he is not here, he is risen.

But it seems ironic to be commanding any gathering of people to ‘wake up’ in a culture which apparently never sleeps!

We are buzzing away all the time, we are twenty-four seven, our devices breathe silently on our bedside tables, close at hand in case we are needed or need to check someone’s status in the middle of the night...
We are used to rolling news, instant attention, we are never ‘off’. It seems we never stop and we never want to stop. We are always awake! Can the Advent exhortation to ‘wake up’ be of any significance in a world that never sleeps? We may not be asleep- but I guess the question is- are we actually alive?

I suppose we might want to consider what kind of wakefulness we currently inhabit. With all our supposed alertness, with all our ‘woke’, we seem to miss so very much and are often dead to the world and its trouble, sorrow, need sickness and adversity.

We are sleepwalking into a climate emergency of our own making; we seem to look away and close our eyes when 39 people die in the back of a lorry, trafficked into this country for cheap labour; we look on indifferently as poverty and homelessness become the norm; racism and prejudice hold sway infiltrating our common discourse, apparently justified by our dream of being an independent island nation; we shrug drowsily as politicians lie to us and treat the future of this nation like a schoolboys game of Risk; we are ignorant about injustice both economic and social, and we are sluggish to respond to huge multi-national tech giants who mine our personal data and undermine our democracy.

What is going on? Are we actually asleep?

For all that we think we are awake- our actions belie a very sleepy attitude to life.

In contrast, the prophet Micah offers a vision, a dream of what is possible for those alert enough to see it; a different world where the weapons of indifference and aggression are re-fashioned into ploughshares and pruning hooks, representing a turn from death to life in all of its fullness.

What a world it might be if, similarly, the hard heart of all cruel words was softened and made flesh again. What a world it might be if compassion fatigue was given the rude awakening it deserves…Wake up! Wake up!

Martin Luther King seemed to sense this very human proclivity to snooze lazily through injustice, hatred, oppression and violence and our propensity to cocoon ourselves with easy comforts:

One of the great liabilities of history, he said, is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change. Every society has its protectors of status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Today, our very survival depends on our ability
to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.

The protectors of the status quo today might say ‘There is peace and security’. The fraternities of the indifferent may argue- ‘there is no urgency, go back to sleep, be as you were’- but says St Paul in the letter to the Thessalonians, ‘the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.’

This sense of urgency, this sense of being alert and watchful and vigilant is found today on the lips of children and young people who are honest and wide-eyed, seeing sleepy resistance and apathy for what it is in relation to the environment. Greta Thunberg said in a speech to the European Parliament ‘I ask you to please wake up and make the changes required possible. To do your best is no longer good enough. We must all do the seemingly impossible.’

In his 63rd Sermon, St Augustine, reflecting on the story of the stilling of the storm at sea, warns his listeners not to let the faith ‘sleep in your hearts against the storms and waves of this world’.

When we are drawn into hatred and vengeance and selfishness this is

‘because Christ is asleep in you, he says. What does it mean that Christ is asleep in you? That you have forgotten Christ. So wake Christ up, remember Christ; let Christ stay awake in you, think about Him’.

Advent offers us a time to be shaken from our selfish reveries and lazy day dreams. Why are you sleeping? Christ asks of each one of us. Can you not keep watch with me for just one hour?

We are challenged to open our eyes and wake up. We are given a vision of a world which is alive, and quick, and vital. A world which is waking-up to new possibilities and a new way of being. A world where we build up each other in love and wake up Christ in our hearts.

We can be attentive to this call, or we can roll over and pull the metaphorical duvet back over our heads, closing our eyes once again to all that God in Christ is trying to tell us.

The season of Advent sets alarm bells ringing - challenging us to ask ourselves whether we are brave enough to wake up to reality, and set our face to whatever challenges befall us, when we begin to see everything more clearly, as if scales have been lifted from our eyes.
May we greet this advent morning with confidence, as the dayspring from on high breaks upon us. In the defiant words of Maya Angelou:

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear, I rise

God in Christ is raising the whole earth from its slumber, that work is begun in the incarnation which we begin to anticipate today and wrought through his crucifixion and glorious resurrection.

This is a re-enlivening of creation, a re-awakening, a new day is dawning for us all.

Are we brave enough, are we defiant enough to say:

I rise. I am awake and Christ is awake in me?

In Christ, we wake, we live, we rise. To his name be glory forever. Amen.