

day a terrible storm arises and threatens their property and their lives. The man cries out, "Help me, God!"

A voice comes out from the midst of the storm, saying, "Where is my cup of cool water?"

A hallmark of spiritual traditions is that they warn about becoming lost in the world, oblivious to a deeper meaning of life in and around us and the simple, nourishing acts of kindness we can share that mean much more than we know. The demands of life can be incessant, alluring and consuming. There is always more to do and not enough time to do it. From the point of view of this story, it's all too easy for us to stop paying attention to the simple requests of God.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Like a thief in the night it has arrived, with us largely unprepared. No worries, though- we weren't asked to prepare much; but we are asked to pay attention.

There is a difference between the two. You can prepare and still not pay attention to the things that matter most. Maybe you have your Christmas shopping list all together already, have purchased most of what is on it, and have been grooving on the Xmas carols playing at the mall.

Maybe your early busyness, being occupied by shopping, has been your necessary distraction from all the political rhetoric from both sides of the aisle this election season.

In the answer to the man's question from the opening story, "what is the world all about?," all too often the answer to that question is: the world is a place of forgetfulness, a loss of memory of who we are and whose we are, all children of God, together....

In the metaphor given in Matthew's Gospel message, the world is a place where we lose focus; we fall asleep. We pay no attention to the underlying spiritual dimensions of life. Eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage are all good and necessary things; working in the field, grinding at the mill take up our time and preoccupy our minds. And they can consume our lives as well, and that's a problem.

In reflecting on the imagery given by the Bible, we would do well to consider the political insight offered by columnist Salena Zito to take these words seriously, rather than literally, rather than literally but not seriously.



There comes a time when we stop and ask the question. “How can I be so busy and yet still be so empty?” It’s a question we should be asking before all the presents are bought and wrapped, and definitely before they all lie unwrapped in piles around the Christmas tree on Christmas morning; with nothing

for us left to do but wonder: “what’s next?” (And that’s one reason why I think it’s a real blessing that we’ll be able to be together for a very special Christmas Day worship service this year that Rev. Jenn is putting together for us - in Smith Hall.)

“How can I be so busy and yet still feel so empty?” Ever ask that? The dominance of frantic activity can overwhelm us in this season. People already busy become busier. The to-do lists grow and grow. We talk about our busyness like it’s a badge we wear on our sleeve. And unfortunately, all our activity can deaden our awareness about others and can put us to sleep, spiritually speaking. When checking off our lists and staying as busy as we can begins to be an end in itself, we miss the meaning and the message of the season. We are at odds with the purpose of God arriving among us in human form.

Our frantic bodies and minds gradually yearn for the quiet, boring, doldrums days of January, rather than the deep joy of Christmas. The commercial rush of Santa Claus works against the deep reason for the season.

We mistakenly treat nurturing our spirits as a luxury, as what we can do after we’ve taken care of everything else & gotten everything else in order. If that’s the case for you, you have it backwards.

Truth is that we draw life from our spirits, not from our shopping, and when we try to draw from the wrong well, we end up empty instead of nourished.

So it goes like this.

If our bodies are hurting, we'll pay attention, see the doctor and do what we're told to regain our physical health.

If our financial security or social status is threatened, we'll see the right people, struggle and fight to re-right ourselves, our finances and our position.

But, spiritually, we allow ourselves to languish and even atrophy. Our spiritual wellness is an afterthought, if we ever think of it at all.

As a society, we are not so good at improving our spiritual well being. It falls very low on our list of priorities, to our detriment, individually and as a nation. We value everything but the Spirit that ultimately sustains us all.

So how are we to keep spiritually aware, to pay attention to the things that matter most, especially early in this season of Advent? How are we to keep awake while working in the field, grinding at the mill, shopping at the mall, working at our desk? It is not so easy.

We may have the desire, but we might not have the know-how. And to simply shout 'Stay Awake'- or "Jesus is coming, Look Busy!!" might be a temporary fix, but it won't help much. We need a way forward, a way to compliment desire with effective strategies.

Some friends of mine, members of my Homiletical Feast preaching group, have been working at this for some time now, asking how members of their congregations have been successfully smuggling spiritual exercises into the world of the everyday and the working world. Here are some ideas.

One doctor in a New Jersey congregation says a special prayer every time he washes his hands, giving thanks to God. He explains that the prayer isn't meant to purify, but to remind him that the person he is treating is more than their disease. In other words,

with this simple act of washing, he stays awake to the spiritual dimension of people while tending to their bodily needs.

A woman in Delaware pauses before a Christmas tree in front of the building where she works. She brings to her mind the connection that exists between earth and heaven, the tree firmly rooted in the ground, creation founded in God's love. She says that as she takes a moment of time, just a brief pause on the way into the building, to let this speak to her, her day goes better. She remembers who she is, as part of a greater whole. She is more patient, listens better, and is more aware of her purpose over the next working hours.

A women's Bible Study group in North Carolina takes time together to do their Christmas cards, together... to talk about some of the people they write cards to, using is as devotional time, with a pause, and a prayer- and an invitation to join them for Christmas Eve services, when appropriate.

A congregation outside Scranton, PA is choosing to be 'welcoming witnesses' this year. That is, whether they choose to say Merry Christmas, or 'Happy Holidays', or even "Peace Be With You"- the distinctive part of their witness will be to take a moment to look into the eyes of the person they are addressing...intentionally, deliberately; (looks sometimes count more than words, don't they?) Connecting eye to eye means taking someone seriously, even for a moment, which is more than often happens in the midst of seasonal shopping madness.

All these are steps toward paying attention to what matters most.

(And we have plenty more steps available to take this season at Second Presbyterian, including the annual Alternative Gift Market, next Sunday... see below, from Fahima in Afghanistan!)

The first and most necessary step of being prepared is paying attention, and knowing what to pay attention to. The good news of Advent is that we know that a loving and merciful God will arrive.

The preparedness will come, we know how to do that. May we together pay attention to what matters most, and WHO matters most, as we await the God who again arrives as a defenseless infant, far away from home, cuddled in his mother's arms. In Jesus' name; Amen.