

"Falling Asleep in Church"

The First Sunday in Advent

Matthew 22:1-14

Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

November 30, 2008

It would be so easy to think of the reading from Matthew as having only to do with end-time things. I remember how that was pushed several years ago before the turn of the millennium. There was even a letter from the Bishop to all the pastors urging people to join the church before the end of the century. The lectionary every year for the first Sunday of Advent has readings about being ready. Expectation, preparation, not getting caught off guard.

Matthew tells a story of a wedding feast where people are not prepared. It was time for the feast and some people did not want to go and others had all kinds of excuses. The way Matthew tells it the story is brutal and hard to understand. It seems to focus on those who reject the call of God on their lives. But I also hear it urging us to be ready at all times. Are you ready for those moments when God opens an opportunity for you to help someone else find a new life in Him? What Matthew remembers Jesus telling us about is that the Kingdom of God is coming, and is now already here in Him, and that we should be ready constantly for the call of the Kingdom on our lives.

It's a funny thing that people tend to think of church as being boring. We have a tendency to come to church expecting it to all hinge around some great special music, or to be centered on whether or not the preacher had a great sermon. Honestly, I understand and appreciate that. But the real reason we go to church is to worship God. To join others in giving God first place in our lives. To praise God in singing, in praying, in reading his word, in honoring Him with our offerings and our commitments to serve His kingdom.

Sometimes though we are like the little boy in the joke I heard years ago. Every Wednesday night he went to prayer meeting with his grandmother. He found it really boring. One night instead of going to prayer meeting with his grandma, he went to the circus. The next time he saw his grandma he said, "Grandma, you should go to the circus with me sometime. Cause once you've been to the circus you won't want to go to prayer meeting anymore."

Jesus challenged us to not fall asleep in church. Or anywhere else for that matter. He calls us to always be ready for the moments that are constantly before us to serve His Kingdom by serving others. God calls us all the time, and the challenge for us is to be ready.

I've told you before about a guy named Ray who called me one night about the breakup of his marriage. I invited him to DivorceCare and talked directly to him on the phone that night. To keep the story short, Ray ended up finding a church and becoming active with his son, and starting a program in his own church. I often wondered what would have happened if I had not been ready that night when he called. Jesus calls us to be ready for every opportunity His Kingdom presents to us. All around you every day, every week are people who are struggling with life. With all the varieties of hurt and pain life brings. You are the people of God. You are the ones who say you are followers of Jesus.

Do you know how to speak the word of hope, the word of faith, the word of conviction – because of what God has done in your life? Because of what you have learned about God through life and through worship and through learning experiences at church? Are you ready, or did you fall asleep at church?

Our opportunity as Christians is to share the light of Christ. To be ready to share the light any time an opportunity presents itself. And if you have not fallen asleep at church, those opportunities are there around you all the time. This is not just the job of the preacher, but of all who have been touched by the love of God in their lives.

The opportunity of the church is to create a loving caring atmosphere where all are welcome, where healing of hurts can take place, where hearts open to the love of God because of the care of His people.

Our opportunity is to display an atmosphere of joy where people can laugh because of the bounty of God in their heart, where an optimistic hopeful spirit overwhelms the discouragement of the world and enables people to face the battles of life expecting to be victorious.

How are we doing? Have we fallen asleep in church? Because it is easy to fall asleep in church when we have lost our focus.

The reading from Exodus 32 in today's lectionary is about a bunch of people who fell asleep in church. They had already been set free from 400 years of slavery. God had given them a new life, provided for them in the difficult times. Yet they still fell asleep. As Moses, their leader, went off to a mountain to be alone for a while, they lost the focus on what God had done for them. They forgot about God himself. Instead of worshipping God while Moses was gone, they melted down all their gold and jewelry and made a golden calf to worship.

Humans are made to worship. Made with a longing for God. Spiritual by nature. But these people forgot how good God had been to them. They began hunting around for some other way to burn off their spiritual energy. Contemporary people are no different than those people thousands of years ago. We are made the same way. Human nature has not changed. We are created to worship. We need someone bigger than ourselves, outside ourselves. When we turn in on ourselves, everything gets goofy.

We fall asleep when we lose focus on God and his call on our lives.

These ancient people got into worshipping things, rather than the Creator God who had set them free. They could take the things and change their shape and still worship them. It could start out as gold ore, become a bracelet, be made again into the form of a calf. It was still THINGS. Just stuff. But they were willing to worship it, like IT could do something for them. Are we any different? Kinda scary isn't it? "I will be so happy when we get that new car." "I will be so excited when the new furniture I ordered comes in." "You should see this _____ I just got. It's to die for." It sure is.

We fall asleep when we lose focus on the living God. I think of things I have seen and heard about in my lifetime. The color of the walls in a classroom, or the carpet. Should we allow pianos in church? I remember a guy who said he didn't mind drums in the first service, but they should put away before the second service. I wanted to ask him if we should put the organ away during the first service. A church debating over whether men and women should sit beside each other in church. Should we allow electricity in the home? Can we drink soda out of cans when they also put beer in cans.

We fall asleep in church when we lose focus.

Jesus talks about people not being ready for a wedding feast when it was time for the party to start, so instructions were given to go out and find people who were ready to party. Isn't it just a little shocking that Jesus would compare sacred spiritual things to a wedding party? But he did. A great celebration is being thrown and you are invited. But are you ready? Or did you fall asleep in church?

Are you ready for celebrating, feasting, dancing, laughing, joking at the great feast? A celebration of the Kingdom. Has the joy of the Lord done a housecleaning in your soul? Have you let his joy so fill you that every fear and doubt, every sin and guilt, every touch of selfishness and negative attitude – has been swept away?

God calls us to put in a good word for him, but we are snoozing. God calls us to extravagant generosity but we are snoozing. God calls us to radical hospitality but we are snoozing. God calls us to passionate worship but we are snoozing.

I remember one time receiving a long distance call (back before cell phones) from a former church member. "How is the church going?" How do you think it would have played if I had said – we got rain this week and the grass is green, some people just planted flowers out in the church yard. We had a wedding on Saturday and still got the carpet swept before Sunday. A guy came and changed the batteries in the smoke detectors and things are going great." Don't you think the person really wanted to hear about new people in the church, new programs, and new attitude and spirit, deeper commitments to Christ, finding new ways to serve people, neat things happening in people's lives?

When you stay focused, you just can't fall asleep in church. Paul tells us to do that. To keep focused. To keep focused on "... those things that are good and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and honorable."

Advent is a time of hearing the call to always be ready.

Don't fall asleep in church.