



## “Pay Attention”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

*Isaiah 2:1-5*

*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!*

*Romans 13:11-12*

*Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;*

Thanksgiving came late this year and boy, did it arrive in dramatic style—rain, cold, snow and blowing wind for many. Still, in the midst of family traditions, new traditions in new configurations of friends and family, travel plans—some successful some interrupted, in the midst of it all came these recent days set aside for giving thanks. For saying “thank you” and “I love you” to those most dear to us and to the new friends that have miraculously found their way into our lives and hearts this year.

“Practice gratitude,” a wise person advises. “The world is full of wonder, opportunity and goodness.”

And today, just by turning the page of the calendar, a new month begins, a new season in the church year begins, the first season of our year. Advent is upon us with its beckoning invitation to be still, to be quiet, to make space in our hearts and minds and souls for light and new life.

The poet Denise Levertov writes of

“An awe so quiet I don't know when it began.  
A gratitude had begun to sing in me.  
Was there some moment dividing song from no song?  
When does dewfall begin?  
When does night fold its arms over our hearts to cherish them?  
When is daybreak?”

What a beautiful way to think of this four-week season of Advent, night folding its arms over our hearts to cherish them. Daybreak on the cusp of becoming visible.

We observe this season in our worship in several ways. You'll see that the color of our worship paraments has changed from green to blue. Through the season of Advent, our worship visuals depict the midnight blue of this season, a deep blue that is the color of the night sky just before dawn, a darkness just ready to brim over with light, the light of a new day, new beginnings, new promise, new hope. This is the light that will come to us in Christ Jesus, the Light of the World.

This year, we will be accompanied through the Advent season by a variety of artists – the composers and performers of the season's beautiful music, the art of our friend, John August Swanson, and the poetry of Mary Oliver. “Pay attention,” she writes. The worship of this season calls us to pay attention, to see with new eyes, to remember the promise, and to renew our hope.

Pay attention. In the midst of it all, God is doing a new thing. “The true light that gives light to everyone is coming into the world,” John's Gospel proclaims.

Mary Oliver is an American poet, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, who died in January of this year at the age of 83. She had said that even as a child she was not comfortable in buildings, but delighted in the out-of-doors, in nature. There she felt at peace and at home. She walked with a small notebook, always ready to jot down things she observed, the details of creation that reveal the wonder and presence of God all around. “Pay attention” was, we might say, the theme song of her life, a life filled with wonder, humble attentiveness, and a certainty that reality is filled with promise.

She wrote in her poem, “Yes! No!”: “To pay attention / this is our endless and proper work.”

The lines of our Advent theme that you see on the cover of the Order of Worship and this year’s Advent Devotional, come from her poem, “Sometimes,” exploring what it means to notice ourselves and our world—to be playfully curious, to say yes to wonder, slowing down, asking questions, paying attention, and telling stories.

She writes:

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*

Paul’s letter to the church in Rome from which we also hear this morning hints at a similar theme, a theme essential to our spiritual work through the weeks of Advent. “Besides this,” he writes, “you know what time it is, how it is *now* the moment for you to wake from sleep.” Isn’t that another way of saying: wake up, pay attention...?

“For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

Remember how we’ve said many times that our faith is real faith for a real world? Now, as it was then for the early church in Rome, all kinds of things were going on that were tumultuous and frightening, things that robbed people of their dignity and their hope. It’s as if Paul is trying to say to them and now to us: don’t let all that lull you into sleep and fear. Think again. Pay attention. You know what time it is, even now the time when salvation is nearer than you think. Remember the word that Isaiah saw. The prophet Isaiah, paying attention, saw the word of God, the word of promise, the word of assurance, the word of hope: “In days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s home shall be established...all nations shall stream to it...for the Lord shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Pay attention to what God is doing even now. Look closely. Remember the promise. Remember who and whose you are, people of God. Look deep into the smile of a joyful child. Catch the eye of someone standing near you in line at the grocery store. Listen for the good news stories sometimes lifted up in the press. Pay attention. Let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Now there’s one more thing we do in worship in this season to help us remember and pay attention. We light the candles in our Advent wreath, four candles and on Christmas Eve, the Christ candle in the center. And on Christmas Eve, we’ll each hold a candle and the light of hundreds of candles will fill this sanctuary with warmth and joy.

But today, on the first Sunday of Advent, we light the first one. Just one candle. You have to look closely and pay attention to notice it, perhaps. One candle piercing the darkness. One candle heralding the promise. One candle signaling that daybreak is near, closer than we think.

Pay attention. “The true light that gives light to everyone is coming into the world.”

Amen.

Notes:

Denise Levertov. “...That Passeth Understanding.” In *Selected Poems*, New Directions Publishing, 2003.

Mary Oliver. “Sometimes.” In *Red Bird*, Beacon Press, 2008.

2015 interview with Mary Oliver by Krista Tippett. *On Being* podcast.

Remembrance by Claire Vouk, Jan.25, 2019.