

First Weekend of Advent (RCL/B)

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

November 28-29, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I don't know about you, but it's easier for me to wake up than to stay awake. I'm a morning person. I'm more "with it" at 7 a.m. on Wednesdays than at 11 p.m. on Christmas Eve. When I was in high school and babysitting for neighbors who stayed out till midnight, it was a stretch to keep my eyes open. But if one of the dogs nudges me awake at 3:30 a.m., I may be a bit groggy but am basically good-to-go.

In our Gospel for this first weekend in Advent, Jesus says, "Keep alert!" (Mk. 13:33) "[K]eep awake!" (Mk. 13:35) Then for good measure He says it again: "Keep awake!" (Mark 13:37b) I just hope He'll be willing to wake me up, because I'm all too aware I am **not** "woke" about many things.

Let me share with you a compelling example of someone who came to a shocking realization, a man who had a life-transforming change of heart. His name was Kaname Harada and he was a Japanese World War II ace, the pilot of a Zero (Mitsubishi fighter plane) who shot down five of our U.S. torpedo planes during the Battle of Midway, five other U.S., British and Chinese planes elsewhere, and who shared credit for 10 other "kills." During the attack on Pearl Harbor, he was tasked with protecting Japanese carriers. At the time he was disappointed he didn't have the chance to bomb the U.S. fleet at anchor.

Mr. Harada visited Pearl Harbor on the 50th anniversary of the attack in 1991. (A week from Monday, December 7, will be the 79th anniversary... 'Sounds like such a long time ago, but those of you who have been to Oahu and visited the Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor will certainly remember the eerie sight of oil bubbles still percolating up to the surface all these years later.) That visit in 1991 was the first time Harada realized that he'd participated in a sneak attack on our U.S. Navy, without Japan even having declared war on the U.S. The next year he began to speak out about his wartime experience. The Persian Gulf war had just ended, and he was **very** concerned that Japanese youth were referring to it "as if it were a video game."¹

Long before going public, Mr. Harada had experienced a change of heart. During the American occupation of Japan after the end of the war, he was so fearful he hid from the Americans, despite the fact

he was now a farmer. He suffered from nightmares. In 2015 he did an interview for *The New York Times*, and explained:

“I realized the war had turned me into a killer of men and that was not the kind of person I wanted to be... I fought the war from the cockpit of a Zero, and can still remember the faces of those I killed. They were fathers and sons, too. I didn’t hate them or even know them.”

“That is how war robs you of your humanity, by putting you in a situation where you must either kill perfect strangers or be killed by them.”²

At his wife’s suggestion, he opened up a kindergarten.

“If you want to atone for the lives you have taken, what better way is there than to nurture new lives?” he quoted her as saying in a documentary on his life, “Each and Every Battlefield,” released in Japan....³

Mr. Harada died in 2016 at the age of 99. Most of his adult life he had lived with a changed attitude about war. He **became** “alert.” He **became** “awake.”

Someone has said, “If we’re not busy being born, we’re busy dying.” We believe we experienced rebirth in Holy Baptism, **and** that the presence of the Holy Spirit opens up the possibility of continual rebirth over our lifetime. What attitudes would the Lord reverse in me? What prejudices would the Lord eliminate? What beliefs do I currently hold that the Lord would change? At what points in time and about what issues does the Lord want to shout, “Mary, wake up!!” What change of heart does the Lord, my spiritual cardiologist, desire for me?

Sometimes I wonder, which of my beliefs will seem benighted, archaic, to the grandchildren I have and will someday have (Lord-willing)? What will cause them to want to shout, “Mame, wake up!” What Kingdom possibilities am I blind or deaf to? Then, hopefully, I’ll weigh what they have to say, admit my shortcomings, and urge their patience with the reminder, “God isn’t finished with me yet.” I doubt the required shifts along the way will be as radical as evolving from a WW II ace to a pacifist, but I hope whatever changes the Lord requires I’ll be flexible and humble enough to make, by God’s grace.

When the Lord says, “Keep awake!” it’s **not** like we’re the 14-year-old babysitter looking out the window for the headlights of the returning parents. We’re called to be not just awake but active! Someone has said, “We must so live that it does not matter when he comes.”⁴ We often **don’t** “get it right” on the first bounce, but Advent is a season that invites us to examine our lives by God’s light and alter what’s not right, for Heaven’s sake. There is so much work to be done, to help God’s Kingdom come. In closing, here’s a prayer by a man named Jack Riemer that Rabbi Harold Kushner includes in his book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end war,
 For we know that You have made the world in a way
 That man must find his own path to peace
 Within himself and with his neighbor.
 We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end starvation,
 For you have already given us the resources
 With which to feed the entire world
 If we would only use them wisely.
 We cannot merely pray to You, O God,
 To root out prejudice,
 For You have already given us eyes
 With which to see the good in all men
 If we would only use them rightly.
 We cannot pray to You, O God, to end despair,
 For You have already given us the power
 To clear away slums and to give hope
 If we would only use our power justly.
 We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end disease,
 For You have already given us great minds with which
 To search out cures and healing,
 If we would only use them constructively.
 Therefore we pray to You instead, O God,
 For strength, determination, and willpower,
 To do instead of just to pray,
 To become instead of merely to wish.

Amen.

¹Sam Roberts, “Kaname Harada, Pearl Harbor Fighter Pilot Who Became Pacifist, Dies at 99” (*New York Times*, May 6, 2016), A23.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.