

Homily for Nov. 29, 2020 (1st Sunday of Advent)



Who is up to learning a few words in Swahili? Actually, you already know these words if you ever watched the movie or saw the musical *The Lion King*. The main character is Simba. Simba is the Swahili word for “lion.” Another character in *The Lion King* is a wisecracking meerkat named Timon. The meerkat is the image that is staying with me this Advent. Timon

sings a song called *Hakuna Matata* which is Swahili for “no worries” or “no problem.” Picture a bunch of meerkats close to their den standing on their two back legs stretching themselves as high as they can looking and listening for danger. Meerkats seem to do only two things; they work and they watch.

Jesus, in today’s gospel parable, speaks about slaves entrusted with particular **work** to do while their master is away. The parable also talks about a doorkeeper whose job it is to **watch**. Work and watch. Work and watch. Work and watch. Isn’t that what we are supposed to be about during Advent? We should never stop working. Advent is not the time to stop working and debate about when and how the Second Coming of Christ will come about. That is not the kind of watching we are called to.

Watching is equivalent to praying. And what is prayer? Attentiveness to what God is doing in my life and in the life of the world. St. Paul says, “**Pray unceasingly;**” pray without stopping. He does not mean stop everything and get on your knees 24/7. He means that whatever we do--our work--we should always do with an awareness of the presence of God. In that way our work will come out of our prayer. And we will realize our work was never really our work at all; it was God’s work being done through us all alone. Prayer make us more attentive to what God is doing right here, right now.

Isaiah, in the first reading, struggled with this. We might say Isaiah was not present to God’s presence in the present. He was living in the nostalgic past even to the point of calling God “**Our Redeemer from of old.**” Isaiah recalls how in the

past God did awesome deeds and even made the mountains quake. But, unfortunately, that all seems to be in the past. We need You, God, to **tear open the heavens and come down** in this mixed up world of ours here and now. But that does not seem to be happening. I bet there is a lot of us, especially since the pandemic hit, who wish God would tear open the heavens and come down and make everything right again. And do it now so we can have some semblance of a “normal” Christmas. Like Isaiah, we feel abandoned and could use a little help. If you pray that way, you are not alone. That was Isaiah’s prayer until a brilliant moment of inspiration hit him. He suddenly remembered, **“God, you are the potter, we are the clay, the work of your hand.”** Jesus says referring to God, **“My father never stops working and neither do I.”** If you have ever watched a potter at work, as I have, you would have noticed how many times a potter has to build up and break down the clay before they are satisfied with the final product. Even when we think God is doing nothing, the Great Potter is always at work. Work and watch, work and watch, work and watch.

We might say, “I don’t get it.” You don’t have to get it. Advent is not a time for explanations, only experiences. I have never seen summer, and I cannot explain summer. But I have experienced the pushing forth of buds on the trees and so I conclude, “Summer is here.” Similarly, I’ve never seen God. But, if I am awake and watchful and attentive to my experiences, I conclude, “God is here.”

There is a wonderful spiritual writer named Paula D’Arcy. When she was 27 and pregnant with her second daughter, a police officer, unannounced, came to her door with the news that her husband and 2-year old daughter had been involved in a car accident. They were both killed by a drunk driver.

There is a lead-in line to today’s parable about being awake. In that lead-in line Jesus says, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”** Getting the news that her husband and daughter were killed meant for Paula, that, for all intents and purposes, heaven and earth did pass away.

Heaven and earth are supposed to be the very things that never pass away, the things you can count on, the anchors that moor us in life. For Paula, her world was gone; the floor beneath her feet was no longer there and she was in freefall. To make a long story short, Paula gave birth to her second daughter and painstakingly worked through her grief. She turned to Scripture, God’s words that

never pass away. She kept working and watching, working and watching, working and watching. She kept watching for the signs that God, the Great Potter, had not abandoned her but was still working in her life. Paula was able to see, because she was watching, awake and attentive, the hand of God working in this tragedy. She goes on to write 15 books, many on grief, that have helped countless people throughout the world.

With the pandemic, if heaven and earth have not passed away, they are certainly altered in a major way. Can we be awakened to the new normal that God is inviting us to, even if we prefer the old normal? Can we let go of the nostalgic past, as Isaiah had to, and as Paula had to, so that God can bring to birth something new in the present?

When we allow the worker and the watcher to unite in us, we will experience the coming of the Lord, this Advent, not as some future event but as a present reality. If we can do that, we will no longer see the pandemic as a curse to be gotten over with and gladly forgotten. Instead, we will see through the pandemic to a Potter who has never stopped working renewing the world like it was the first day of creation. So, keep working and keep watching...your salvation is at hand.

Fr. Phil