

Keep awake

By [E. Carrington Heath](#)

December 5, 2013

Most seminarians at some point in their schooling do a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE. The experience is a cross between an internship as a hospital chaplain and extended group therapy. (Some say that “CPE” actually stands for “Continually Painful Experience”.) It’s a time-honored tradition for pastors-in-training—which is why, in the summer between my first and second years of seminary, I found myself working in a hospital in downtown Atlanta.

About once a week we each took our turn sleeping in an on-call room at the hospital and responding to all the needs for a chaplain throughout the night. We would carry an emergency pager that would go off every time someone went into cardiac arrest, or a new trauma patient came into the emergency room, or a patient died. And, despite the fact that the beeping of this pager could wake Lazarus, I was scared to death that I would sleep through it.

I would put the pager right by my head while I slept. Or, I would constantly wake up and check it. Or, some nights early on, I wouldn’t sleep at all.

Jesus was talking to his disciples, and he told them, “Keep awake...you do not know when your Lord is coming.” We read that text from the Gospel, or one like it, on every first Sunday of Advent. Jesus is clear that he will come to us when we least expect it, and so he encourages us to keep our eyes and ears open, and pay attention...keep awake.

I wonder what Jesus would have thought about my pager that summer and the way it kept me awake. It did its job, even on the nights when I slept. But the funny thing is, sometimes that pager could become less of an alarm clock and more of a distraction. I spent so much time waiting for that thing to go off that I stopped looking around me in the hospital and seeing what else was going on. I began to think that the only things that happened in that hospital were death and heartache. That pager kept me from sleeping, but it didn’t do that much to keep me awake.

As the summer went on, I began taking walks late at night. I'd walk around the different hospital units, and out into the humid Southern summer. I'd sit with relieved family members taking a break outside, or walk with cardiac patients who had to circle their unit day after day as a part of their rehab. And along the way, I saw signs of new life everywhere I went. By the end of the summer, I saw the hospital for what it really was: a place with its fair share of tragedy, yes, but also a place of profound healing.

In Advent we are asked to keep awake, and to keep watch. But during this season we often find ourselves focusing on the loudest or most urgent-sounding alarms. We have to buy presents. We have to decorate. We have to go to that party. We have to get to every church event. We must celebrate, no matter what. And by Christmas morning we sometimes feel so exhausted from the holiday gauntlet that we are ready for the season to end.

It doesn't have to be that way. In Advent we can make a decision to be distracted, or we can make a decision to keep awake and keep watch. When we slow down and look around, we can find evidence that Christ's love is already active in this world. Parties and shopping and celebrating are great. But so are the moments when you sit with your partner on the couch, in front of the tree, and feel Christ's incarnate love in their love for you. So is the Christmas pageant when you see children find joy in donning old bathrobes to play shepherds. So is the simple warmth of seeing the way a candle's light can cut through the darkness that comes earlier and earlier this time of year. Evidence of the incarnation, both the one that happened 2000 years ago and the one that is still coming, is all around us. And we can be witnesses to it all.

*Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)*