

Awake and watching this Advent

We need the prophets to unmask power's seductions.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue



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This year Advent finds me already waiting. Like many others, I am waiting to see who the new president-elect will appoint to key positions; waiting to see what the new government will look like; waiting to see if he will build a wall, ban Muslims from the country, or bring back manufacturing jobs. No matter how we voted, we're all waiting anxiously to see if Donald Trump will keep his campaign promises.

As I tune restlessly in and out of the news, refreshing my feed for the latest analysis, Advent arrives bearing its radical promise. The prayers and hymns and readings of this season remind me that we're not just waiting for a president to assemble a government. We're waiting for the eternal to break into time. We're waiting for Christ to be born in the world once more. We're waiting for God.

Advent began this year, as it always does, with the prophets proclaiming the fundamental religious message: wake up. I feel them pull at my attention as I fret

and worry. Now is the moment to wake from sleep, they call. Shake yourself from the dust and listen. Rise up, for everything is about to change.

These words resonate both with those who despair over the new presidency and those who greet it with excitement. The prophets, however, speak from a position outside the seat of power. Whether our candidate wins or loses, we always need to wake up, to listen to prophetic voices cutting through power's glamour and seductions.

One of those seductions will be the tendency to downplay the rhetoric of Donald Trump's campaign. It was only strategically hateful, we are already being told. But Trump widened dangerous paths when he appealed to white nationalism and blamed our nation's problems on refugees and immigrants. These are old paths, and we know where they lead. Stay awake, the prophets insist. Stay focused.

Martin Luther King Jr. once called our failure to remain awake during periods of social change "one of the great liabilities of history." Advent offers an opportunity to all of us to cultivate a wakefulness with the power to shape the future.

We are called to wake up but also to watch. Watching is an active, layered kind of wakefulness, a way of waiting and seeking at once. We are to watch what is inside of us and outside of us, to watch the signs of the times and to extend our watching beyond our time toward the day when swords are beaten into plowshares, the poor satisfied, and the powerless strengthened, the day when all peoples gather at the Lord's banquet and all tears are wiped away. Advent trains us to keep our eyes on the horizon and let what we see in the distance shape how we respond to what we see up close. This takes practice.

In every Advent, we have the chance to reflect on our lives and commitments.

We might begin with how we speak to one another. The hateful, pinched language of the campaign has had real and damaging consequences. What would happen if all of us were convinced that language that is honest, creative, and full of possibility, born both of what we see and what we hope for, could also have consequences? Would we imagine new forms of living that are spacious and inclusive? Would we cultivate new courage to resist what is not?

Advent calls us to prepare a way within us and in the world around us to receive the Christ-child. We remember him as a baby born in a stable because his laboring

mother was turned away from safe shelter. We remember him as a refugee whose parents crossed the border into Egypt to protect him from violence. To prepare a way for Jesus is to create safe places for him to live, to protect him from the violence that threatens him.

The baby for whom we wait this Advent bears his good news into the world even before he can speak. We hear it in the lengths his parents went to protect him, the miles the Magi traveled to honor him, the awe of the shepherds who heard his birth announced by an angel, the assurance of the angel that this was good news for all people.

These are stories of reverent attention to the divine presence that is shining on the margins. Advent illuminates the Christ Child's face at borders where refugees seek safe passage, in rural and urban places of poverty and despair, in prisons, in communities that have been demeaned and scapegoated, and those that have borne the brunt of white supremacist ideologies since our nation's founding.

In every Advent there is much at stake. We have an opportunity to enter a new year awake and alive to the presence of God in our midst, a chance to recalibrate our lives and our commitments in the light of God's vision. It is one of the greatest blessings of our faith that God seems never to tire of inviting us to begin again.

Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

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