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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X42
1 Advent (Year B) 8:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 3 December 2017 World AIDS Day Weekend

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Waking Up

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (Mk. 13).

Let me tell you what it felt like when I woke up... Not long after the AIDS Quilt went up this fall here in the Cathedral I participated in Tuesday night Yoga.¹ When you are doing balance poses it helps to focus your attention on a distant point. That evening I gazed at the names of the people on the quilts.

Most of the people I knew who died of this disease back when I was in my twenties seemed a lot older than me. But that night for the first time I saw them from the perspective of my older self. Arthur died at the age of 33, Jerry at 41, Michael 37. And the list goes on Bob, Jack, Rick, Bill, Art, David, Ken, James, Margaret, and Joseph. So many didn't even have the chance to experience the world as a forty year old, or to have a fiftieth birthday.

These thoughts passed through my consciousness like a sparrow entering a high church window and then flying out again. At the end of yoga we all lie down on our back in the most comfortable pose of all Shavasana (sometimes known as corpse pose). The full weight of this hit me as I was lying there. And I started weeping. I had forgotten what it felt like to cry like this – the tears flowed down my face through my hair into my ears.

On Friday night Mike Smith, one of the co-founders of the AIDS Quilt, said that he had kept his feelings in a black box within a box, within another box.² On that night during shavasana it felt like I was opening the boxes again. I woke up after having been asleep for a long time.

In 1992 I served at St. John the Evangelist, a church (on Bowdoin Street) known for blessing the relationships of gay and lesbian people and for our ministry to homeless people in Boston. My first pastoral visits were with young people who were dying of AIDS. They were full of creativity and love. Now when I talk to younger people about that time I find it nearly impossible to convey the terror and depth of this tragedy.

Thousands of young people were rejected by their own communities, churches and the families who should have taken care of them. Many had nowhere to go so they came to our church. We cared for them while they were sick. And when they died we treated

their memory and bodies with respect. I have vivid memories of our all night vigils in the soft candlelight of the small chapel before their funeral mass the next day.

I remember traveling far away from the subway line to a decrepit Victorian house in Dorchester to visit John a monk who was dying. He had Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS). His shoulders and kind face seemed so hollowed out. I would not have been able to do this with most people but something about his spirit invited me to ask this priest for his advice about how to give pastoral care. A few weeks later I was washing dishes in the soup kitchen and broke down when I heard that this gentle teacher of mine had died.

After moving to a California suburb in 2001, I buried a lot of these memories. In hospitals I saw mostly older people. The times changed too as treatments improved and HIV Positive people were less stigmatized by society. In a sense I fell asleep.

Today on what we call the First Sunday of Advent we celebrate the first day of the church's new year. We enter a season of preparation that has almost nothing to do with the commercial preparations for Christmas that we see and hear around us. As people following the way of Jesus how should we be? What should we do? I want to give you a long answer and a short suggestion.

1. We follow a three-year cycle of readings. Each year focuses on a different (synoptic) gospel. Of these the Gospel of Mark is the simplest and shortest one. It feels sharp and immediate, a paired down gospel of essentials. In this reading Jesus uses the simplest image to help us understand what we need to become.

Jesus describes the world as a vast household. Its owner goes on a journey and leaves us, his slaves, in charge "each with his work and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch." "You do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn... And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake" (Mk. 13).

The Hawaiian word for this is *maka ala*. It means literally with eyes open, keep alert. Keep awake to the generosity of God. Keep awake to the humanity of others.

You can see the spirit of Jesus' words in the expression "get woke" or "stay woke." It arose out of African American activist communities. With regard to what happened after the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson Missouri "Stay woke" might mean, "stay conscious of the apparatus of white supremacy, don't automatically accept the official explanation of police violence, stay safe."³

Our World AIDS Day speakers on Friday spoke especially movingly about what it means to wake up. Gregg Cassin has survived with HIV for over thirty years. In his twenties when Gregg was struggling over whether he should come out as a gay man, his first boyfriend spoke to him about Jesus.

The boyfriend said that society might despise you. Your family, the government and the church might too. But Jesus does not belong to an institution. Jesus says I am the truth and the life. This is about truth. It is about life, and you have to speak this truth.⁴

Gregg describes his experiences at 1980's AIDS support groups. Before he discovered them he had a terrible struggle and couldn't help but associate the disease with immorality. He said, "I felt dirty." At the meetings each person got up and told his story. They did this with such vulnerability and courage, that each time Gregg would think, "I love this man!" At the end of the meeting he looked around the room and a simple thought occurred to him. These men are innocent. These men are innocent and I am too. This extraordinarily gentle and thoughtful man in the most Christ-like way has dedicated his life to serving others.

Vince Cristosotomo told another story about bringing the AIDS Quilt to Guam and being the first Chamorro person there to speak openly about being gay and HIV positive. Not long after arriving he met a woman. She told him about her brother who had been abandoned by the family and died alone of AIDS in New York City.

It turned out that this had been James Torrey the aerobics instructor Vince had lost touch with years before. It seemed like a miracle but after going through the panels of the quilt they found Vince's.

The authorities had given Vince a long list of banned topics but the last person to talk to him before going onstage was his aunty. She looked him in the eye and said that no matter what happened she would always protect him. Then she gave him \$20 for an ice cream cone. After the speech a man embraced Vince and just wept without letting him go. It was the father who had abandoned James. He cried, "James was such a good boy. I'm so sorry for what I have done!"

2. I hope that these stories will help you to wake up as much as they have helped me. But what do we do next now that we are "woke"? Let me propose an experiment.

Three weeks ago the actor Peter Coyote was our forum guest. In his book he writes about the idea of becoming what he calls "a life actor." This is someone who consciously

creates the role one plays in everyday life. It requires skill and imagination to break out of the implicit rules that constrain us.⁵

Our homework this week is to wake up and to let go of the role we unconsciously play every day, the role of "Ego." This is that part of us that is infinitely eager to assert itself, to get ahead. Strangely enough it is also that part of us which is most easily offended by the perceived slights of others.

In its place, try on the role of the compassionate Jesus. For each of us this is going to mean something different. For some of you it may involve being a lot more assertive. In that case this is your chance to speak a difficult truth, to stand up for someone who is being dismissed, perhaps to reach beyond your privilege to come closer to reality.

For others this means letting go of always having to be right, of the myth that our life could be perfect or the world could be fair. It might mean being kind to someone who has treated you badly or simply just letting someone else go ahead of you in traffic. Try listening more and talking less. Do something nice for someone who you are fairly sure is rotten inside. Be faithful in a way that only God knows about. Be less defensive.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said that, "the church is created each time we gather around Jesus in the sacraments and tend to the hopes and hurts of people."⁶ I believe this. Thank you. Thank you for being the church that responded so heroically to the AIDS crisis and thank you for being the church we are creating right now. Thank you for all the ways you teach me to be awake. Thank you for constantly showing me the generosity of God and the humanity of all God's children.

¹ Tuesday 10 October 2017.

² Stories by Mike Smith, Gregg Cassin and Vince Crisostomo at "World AIDS Day: Stories and Song," Grace Cathedral, Friday 1 December 2017.

³ Charles Pulliam-Moore, "How 'woke' went from black activist watchword to teen internet slang," *Splinter*, 8 January 2016. <https://splinternews.com/how-woke-went-from-black-activist-watchword-to-teen-int-1793853989>

⁴ "Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him"" (Jn. 6:10).

⁵ Peter Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall: A Chronicle* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998) 33. In Keith Johnstone's book *Impro: Improvisation and Theater* he writes that every interpersonal interaction involves the communication of status. I don't know that I believe this, but I do think another helpful exercise is to allow yourself to assume a different level of status in an interaction with another person this week. Johnstone writes that a person who plays high status implicitly sends the message, "Don't come near me, I bite." A person playing low status says, "Don't bite me, I'm not worth the trouble." Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theater* (NY: Routledge, 2015 (1981)) 43.

⁶ I have no official source for this. Jeremy Clark-King told me this quote in November 2017.