1st Sunday: The Sound of Advent

“May he not find you sleeping.” I know this may be obvious, but assuming folks know something is not always wise. So here it is: metaphors, images and symbols in the Bible are not only multivalent (have different layers of meaning); sometimes they can be used in exactly opposite ways. We need to check the context, and look closely. For instance, water can be a symbol of drowning and death; the flood, or Pharaoh’s army drowning in the sea. But it can also be a symbol of life: water from the rock in the desert, in Ezekiel, water flowing out of the Temple, or baptism. Fire can be used to speak of destruction, as in fire and brimstone for Sodom & Gomorrah, or scenes in the book of Revelation. But it can be a symbol of purification in the book of Wisdom and in St. Paul, or a symbol of light and guidance in the Exodus.

So sleeping, “May he not come suddenly, and find you sleeping.” What about Jacob, Samuel, St. Joseph? It was not when they were wide awake that God came with a powerful message and divine guidance. It was while they were asleep. God spoke through dreams. I think we can safely conclude Jesus is not recommending insomnia in today’s Gospel. No, the message is a warning against falling asleep in our spiritual life, and encouragement to remain spiritually awake, alert, attentive, listening.

Here is the irony: always physically wide awake, constantly juggling, running around frantically, almost manic, never stopping, can spiritually be like sleep walking. Going through the motions, but spiritually fast asleep. Quieting, slowing our pace, even taking time to be still on the other hand is essential to remaining spiritually awake. Not daydreaming, but handing the reins of our thought over to the Holy Spirit. Jesus is encouraging us, as we begin Advent, to be spiritually awake, ready for him to come to us.

Have you ever tried to listen to someone in a crowded, noisy reception, gala, or any place filled with noise? Even if they are practically shouting, it is hard to follow the conversation. It is no different when it comes to listening to the Lord. Noise, outside or inside, can get in the way.

The Mass actually teaches us about entering into quiet, wide awake silence and listening, providing opportunities for the many ways silence fits into being spiritually awake. So let me walk through some of those opportunities; when they come, and how to use them. First though, in a general way, I should point out there is external silence and internal silence. Sometimes at Mass we all sing or pray aloud: hymns, responses, acclamations, the Our Father – the sound, all joined as one, sometimes raising the roof – that is one beautiful way to be inspired. At other times we are all listening together, as one person speaks: the readings, the homily, the Eucharistic Prayer, blessings. But there are also times we all try to be quiet, together. Externally, we do our best to be silent, giving the gift of external silence to one another. We aren’t perfect at it; it’s harder for some than others, and parents can have a real challenge on their hands, but what
a gift it can be when we all succeed! The more important silence we can enter even when the effort at external silence fails. That silence? Internal. Quieting the distractions in our mind and spirit as best we can. We help each other when we all strive to enter that silence together. Can’t you feel it when the majority of us are really focused, tuned in, centered? Ok, from external and internal, let’s move on to specifics.

At the Penitential Act, right at the beginning of Mass, we are all invited during external silence to acknowledge our sins. We silently call to mind what could keep us from truly hearing the Word, from receiving the Lord worthily, what might be a barrier. In silence we also remember that the Lord longs to forgive, welcome and embrace us. Silently, in addition to the forgiveness we need, we might even think of someone we need to forgive. Let’s call this all active silence. This active silence is also invited when the priest says “Let us pray.” In the brief external silence that follows, we call to mind what in particular we might be praying for in this Eucharist. A particular need, a particular gratitude, a joy to share with the Lord, a prayer of intercession.

We also have the silence of listening: after the readings, after the homily. In this silence, both external and internal, we try to attend: what caught my attention. What leapt out for me? Where was there consolation, reassurance, challenge, or hope? In what phrase, image or message is the Lord speaking to me right now?

After communion, we have perhaps the richest opportunity. We are invited into the silence of listening, responding, and communing. In quiet, we consider: I have just received the Lord. God loves me, loves those around me today that much. He gave his life for me, and now has come to dwell in me. In that awareness, we share our deepest need, prayer, gratitude. We spend quiet time with the Lord, silently present to one another. We also listen: for love, hope, reassurance, mercy and mission.

Having tasted various moments of hopefully rich, fruitful silence, we try to work similar moments into the course of our day, throughout the week. The Little Blue Books encourage us to find a 6 minute opportunity each day, concluding it by ‘spending some quiet time with the Lord.’ We try to squeeze in other moments as well.

I realize that many of you may think, all this silent stuff may work for folks at a monastery, but not in my life. Not so! I recall a retreat with Sr. Jose Hobday. She spoke about mini-vacations. No, not short day trips. She meant 5 minute vacations. You are standing in line at the checkout counter. Instead of obsessing about what is next on the schedule, or how slow this line is, work in a couple minutes of prayer or quiet. Heading to an appointment? Instead of arriving a minute late, arrive five minutes early, and be recollected and at peace. Stopped in traffic? On hold, on the phone? These can be irritating moments, that add stress. But we can choose to make them times to let go and offer a little prayer, or just recollect ourselves, and God’s presence. Far better
than items we shop for, moments of silence, of prayer, or peace and recollection are gifts we give to God, to ourselves, to the people we love in our life, and even those we don’t. May Advent provide a chance for all of us to appreciate more deeply that Silent Night isn’t just a pretty song. Silence, the Prince of Peace, and peace in our own life: these are all firmly connected.