

My mother liked to tell of my first educational experience. My older sister, Kay, was the teacher, I was her pupil. She was convinced that what she was learning in first grade, I, her three year old brother should be learning as well. But I was an unwilling student – inattentive – uncooperative. And so - as my mother told it – Kay made this threat. “Lynnie if you don’t learn this you will be the dumbest kid in first grade.”

Now I do not know whether her threat worked or whether I remained an unwilling student. But my sister knew that when you want to change someone’s behavior making a threat is a way to get his attention.

Think of the threats you have heard or spoken: “If you don’t clean up this mess you’ll have a time out.” “If you don’t try harder you will get an F.” “If you don’t practice, you’ll never make the team,” or if it is piano practice being spoken of – “you’ll be embarrassed at the recital.” “If you don’t study you will never graduate,” “...never get into college,” “...get into the college of your choice,” “...get a good job,” “...always be poor.” “If you don’t save and invest wisely you will never be able to afford a home,” “... have a second home,” “...have enough for emergencies,” “... have enough for retirement,” “...have enough for your care until you die.” If you don’t watch your diet you will have high blood pressure,” “...have heart trouble,” “...get diabetes,” “...get cancer,” “...get sick,” “...die.” Threats, everywhere threats. You certainly did not come here today to hear more threats.

But Jesus’ words are not intended to put us at ease. “For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Swept them all away – people just like us – busy with our everyday living. Though Jesus never says it I hear that threat that “You’ll be swept away too if you are not ready for the coming of the Son of Man.”

Jesus said, “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

This does not sound like Good News but words intended to change me and you. But how? Change us in what ways? When the investment advisor sends mail asking me to consider whether I will have enough for my retirement she is not just trying to increase my anxiety but wants me to invest through her. What does Jesus want?

The New Testament has many lists of behaviors to be avoided – things like anger, quarrels, fornication, drunkenness, greed, envy. And also behaviors to be encouraged: patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, love, generosity. It could be that Jesus simply wants to remind us to avoid bad things and seek good things. But he does not say that. He says, “Keep awake.” He said, “But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Awake, ready – for when the Son of Man arrives.

In the gospel according to St. Matthew the very last words are Jesus saying this: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Not absent – gone – but promising to be present – always.

Always present – but will we be always aware of his presence?

I am surprised how a threat can fill up my heart and my mind. After 9-11 how often my mind would fill with anxiety about the threat of terrorism! At first every siren blaring had me wondering if this was it – every news bulletin set my heart on edge wondering if a tragedy had occurred. After a drop in the stock market or the dollar or after a rise in the unemployment rate my mind can be constantly anxious about what will happen to us all – whether hard times are coming for me and those I love. The more I think about these things the more anxiety is a constant companion, with me in every moment.

“I am with you always.” What if Jesus were in your heart and mind – taking the place of the anxiety and the fear and the dread? Would you be ready then? Awake? What if in every hour of the day and the night he filled your consciousness? Would you be awake? Ready?

In this same Gospel according to St. Matthew there is another hint about Jesus’ presence. In the parable of the last judgement everyone is surprised to find out that in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoners, Jesus is fed, clothed, visited. “As you did it for one of my little sisters and brothers, you did it for me,” he says.

Could being ready, being awake be about learning to see Jesus in the very people who come into our lives? Especially in the people with needs?

When will Jesus come again? “At a most unexpected time,” he says. Could it be today – in this gathering of his little sisters and brothers? Could it be in his filling up your heart and your mind in every hour of your waking and of your sleep? Could it be with the sound of the last trumpet? Yes, all three.

And in the meal we will share in just a few moments – his life present for you here. For he says to you this day: “Remember, I am with you always.” Amen.