

Advent 1  
November 27, 2022  
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA  
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## Wake Up!

In 1953, in the small town of Sabana Grande in western Puerto Rico, an elementary school teacher sent three children to the spring nearby to bring back water for the school. Two girls and a boy, they took their water buckets and left, knowing the path well. When they got there, suddenly a beautiful woman appeared to them, shining and speaking softly and lovingly to them. More startled than afraid, they listened as she told them how much she loved them, and that she had come to tell the people to go to church.

The children and the woman spoke for a long time, long enough for the teacher to get worried. She made sure the other students were OK, took a couple of other teachers and went to find the children. There they found them, by the spring, speaking with the Virgin Mary. For 40 days she appeared faithfully in the same place. People quickly gathered from all around to hear her message. In many words and in many ways she gave them one message: Return to the faith of her Son. Pray. Go to church. Do good to those around you. Attend to the needs of the needy. Fight for justice.

But the people soon began going to the spring instead of to church. The local priest got upset and jealous. He finally locked the church and left town for a while. The lady, knowing what had happened, decided to make her message clear. She told the people they were all going to church. They all marched up there, with her leading the way. When they got to the locked doors she walked right through them and unlocked them from the inside, letting the throng in. It took a long time, but finally the priest accepted the miracle and welcomed the people. The faith of the town was renewed, and people still go to the spring. There is a shrine there to her now. It is festooned with discarded crutches and other items left behind when people were healed. She is a symbol and medium of God's loving care through the person of the Mother of Christ.

This is one of four similar stories I am going to tell you over the course of Advent. They all feature the Virgin Mary, such a central figure in the Christmas story for which we are preparing. They are all set in Latin America. They span 500 years' time, and they all show what someone told me once about Mary. What we really mean when we say Mary was a virgin is not so much that she had not known a man before Jesus' was born, but that her spirit is pure and strong—pure enough and strong enough to do what any mother wants to do. She provides for a cares for her children. As the first Christian, the first one to respond to God with an open heart through her son, even yet unborn, she is the mother of the church, the mother of us all. She represents us all.

In each one of these appearances, the result is always a revival of the faith in Jesus, her son. Her message, in one form or another, is always a call back to the One at the center of our faith, Jesus, the healer, the sanctifier, the savior of the world.

The lessons today reflect a similar theme. In the lesson from Sacred History, the prophet delivers an oracle. Jerusalem, that now lies in ruins, will not only be rebuilt, it will become the most important place on earth. From her truth and justice will go forth and to her all the peoples of the earth will look. Peace will reign such that weapons of war that deliver death will be remade into tools that deliver life-giving food. Take heart, Israel, says the prophet. Do not get lulled into oblivion here in exile, but watch for the moment when you may return to the touchstone of the Jewish faith and life.

In the passage from the Apostolic Instruction, Paul, convinced that Jesus' second coming was imminent, calls people to be ready. Our redemption is closer now than ever, he says, so stay the course, keep your eyes open and watch.

Of course, watching is the watchword in the lesson from the Gospel of Matthew. Like a thief in the night—at the unexpected hour and in the unexpected way, Jesus will appear among us. For the unprepared it is not going to be pretty, so be on your toes, keep the faith, keep returning to those touchstones of your spiritual life. Make sure the channels are open, doors ready.

What does it mean for us today to watch at this, the beginning of Advent? Jesus' image of a thief in the night is really hyperbole. He wants to shake things up and make us take notice. Think of a hot summer's day, and you're working in the yard with the kids on a Saturday. Suddenly their ears perk up. They have heard something you haven't. It's the tell-tale song of the ice-cream truck! “Daddy, daddy, please, please! Run, daddy, run, or we'll miss out!” If you are not fast enough you will be in the doghouse with your children for days! Jesus is saying, "Can't you hear the music? Or will you let one standing next to you be taken and you walk away, unaware? Will you watch complacently as the one grinding at the mill beside you notices and responds, and you just keep plodding along in a daze?"

It is so easy to be complacent, to go to the spring and only expect to get water for the day, while missing the deep spiritual thirst of the people. Mary didn't miss it and she took action to shake things up. She came down to say to the people, “Don't you see that you're drifting off course? Look back to the church on the hill that is your beacon, your compass and your home. My children, you need more than just water. You need to touch again your spiritual grounding in my Son.”

Is Mary whispering in your ear?

“Just water, my child, when you need so much more? Are you satisfied with just the daily routine, when you need something different? Just the same old tired excuses when you need to be doing justice? The same easy blindness to just who is your neighbor? Don't just draw water for school, kids. Jump into the spring. Swim around a bit. Get wet to the skin. Let it soak in. Then walk away from this place, leaving the crutches of your sleepy blindness behind, and go out to love and serve my son, our Lord, in this very special season.

Or do you want me to come down there myself?”