Stay Awake! It is the first Sunday of Advent and that means that Christmas is coming. …but as much as Christmas is about celebrating the birth of Jesus two millennia ago, it is more about remaining vigilant for the second coming of Christ. In Matthew’s Gospel just before today’s passage is this verse; "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (Matthew 24:30) This kind of waiting can be full of anxiety and fear, who will be left and who will be taken? There is much need to stay awake! But there is more to attentiveness than anxiety…

Another kind of attentiveness, less prone to anxiety, and one that will even be a source of peace and joy in your life. There are various ways of expressing this state, ‘being present in the moment,’ ‘the eternal NOW,’ ‘mindfulness,’ or contemplative prayer. It is available to anyone and is as simple to access as breathing. I learned this anew on a retreat this past weekend from our spiritual director for the retreat, Fr. Scott Harris, MM, MD. This is ancient practice of contemplative prayer or mindfulness of the heart dates back to the early Desert Fathers and Mothers. (c. 3rd Century AD) I had read about this technique long before, and thought it sounded like a good idea, but reading about something like this is of little value – one must experience it, practice it, and, in time, receive its fruits.

As we look into the future, whether it is the immediate future or the eschatological time of fulfillment of the second coming; there is much need to opening ourselves to the prompting of the Spirit. Many know, intellectually, that God loves us, and that Jesus is our brother. To truly experience this relationship with the Trinity we must surrender, become vulnerable and thus
open ourselves to the divine. You may have already experienced God’s love breaking into your life, and when it happens it is powerful and life changing. These experiences can be as startling and fierce as a powerful storm or as quiet and gentle as a soft breeze. My own past experiences are far too rare and I have always wished I could access this transformative power of Love more readily.

On our retreat weekend a number of men took the time (only 10 to 20 minutes) to sit in contemplation and to receive the peace that can come from this practice. Here is what we learned: Go to a quiet place and shut the door. Find a quite place where you can be undisturbed for this time of wordless prayer. You can set an alarm for the time you have set aside; 10, 15, or 20 minutes. Sitting erect is best with your feet flat on the floor. Let your hands rest in your lap. Be open to allowing God to share God’s Spirit and peace in the present moment.

Take some breaths, breathing in through your nose and exhaling out of your mouth. As you breathe in note the rising of your chest. Become aware of the miracle of your life and how each breath you take is a gift of the Creator who is sustaining you at each moment. As you exhale allow your breathing to be a cleansing of your body and spirit. With each breath, let go of any tension in your muscles. As you let go of this tension, feel your body relax as you release each breath. As you become more and more relaxed begin to empty your mind of distracting thoughts. Thoughts will continue to bubble up, don’t fight them. Just let these thoughts go. Don’t worry if these thoughts keep arising – this is natural; don’t try to control them just let them go. Empty your mind as best you can, so that you awareness of God presence can arise all the more.

Accept this time as a gift to yourself so that you will be more free, and energized by the Spirit, better able to follow the will of God in your life. You may be surprised at how quickly this time will pass, and how much more at peace you will be at its conclusion. Try to practice this type of pray three or more times a week. You will find that the benefits are cumulative. Expect miracles. What God has in store for us is better than we can imagine. We simply need to free up our spirit and surrender to God’s grace. If we can be mindfully present, our humility will be rewarded. Then we can be an agent for change in the world by acting in the name of justice, with eyes of compassion. We will also be better able to love with tenderness, through better understanding.

The world may be raging all around us, let it. (Especially in the overly commercialized version of the coming Christmas holidays.) We do not need to be hijacked by all the distractions of the world and pulled into the fray. We will have discovered a secret place where we can go to experience the peace and joy of a loving God. By doing so we will be better equipped to share that same love with others. We will also be more aware and awake, mindful, and ready for this holy season. We will also be standing in hope for the coming of the Lord. Remember what Jesus told his disciples…

“…when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6)