

The career of an altar server has a typical trajectory. Here at Holy Family you can begin altar serving in the fourth grade. Every year a good number of fourth graders sign up for the training. We just trained a new batch last month. Many have their first shot at serving about now. They are usually very excited – and nervous. It’s all new, the putting on of the alb, being up on the altar in front of hundreds of strangers. Some of the more ambitious rookies start to check in at the vestry before mass to see if one of the scheduled servers didn’t show up so they can substitute. Altar serving is a thing in the fourth grade.

And even in the fifth grade, those who found that altar serving is something they like to do are still responsible in showing up on time when scheduled. They enjoy the company of the other servers in the vestry before mass.

But by Middle School the situation changes for many. Some are still enthusiastic, but for others by now altar serving is old hat. It’s a bit of a drag doing the same thing all the time. The thrill has worn off.

Many of their classmates have stopped serving – some by officially contacting the office, others by just not showing up, so the rest are scheduled more often, and asked to fill in for those who are AWOL. There aren't as many waiting at the vestry door to sub anymore.

By high school most of the class have dropped out. It isn't cool, serving mostly with fourth and fifth graders. Honestly, Mass isn't that cool. I end up having to ask (beg) them to serve if we don't have enough servers for a mass. A few servers remain at their post through high school, but most have tired of it and dropped out long before. I don't mean this as a put down of the servers. I really appreciate them. I just wish there were more! But I thought about this dynamic of altar serving when I was reading the gospel for this first Sunday of Advent, because it's typical of all Christians, not just the servers.

“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from . . . the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. Be

vigilant at all times.” These verses speak of the Second Coming of the Jesus. The early Christians, who would have first heard this message, were excited by the new faith. God had come to earth as a baby at Bethlehem. He had died on the Cross and had risen from the dead. Some had seen and touched Him. And He had promised to come back a second time. It could be any day now! They had seen Him do miracles while on earth. His promise is trustworthy. He’s coming back soon.

Only He didn’t. And so those first Christians settled into a routine of faith. Some drifted back into their old, pre-Christian, ways and lives, forgetting or disbelieving Jesus would ever come. We 21st century followers of Christ fall into the same routines in between short periods of conversion and excitement.

Here I think back to our altar servers. They are busy about Jesus’ work whenever they serve at the altar, yet how often does that occur to them? (I know if they don’t, that’s partly on me!) But what about us adults? The altar servers are just following in our footsteps. How many

of us have forgotten the excitement of our faith? How many of us for all practical purposes ignore Jesus in the Eucharist, even as we consume His Body and Blood? For how many of us has following Jesus, worshipping at mass, become a routine – and just not that attractive anymore? How many of us decide, or maybe don't even consciously decide – but we stop showing up to serve and worship Him?

As we begin Advent Jesus warns us not to become spiritually drowsy. Don't let the anxieties and affairs of daily life distract us from the biggest story of our lives. Because the Son of Man is coming in power. And not just at the end of time, in some distant future. Jesus is here even now in our sacraments, the scriptures, in prayer and in all our acts of charity and devotion. And don't forget about our penance service this Wednesday at 7:00.

How are we to live our faith out? As Bl. John Henry Newman wrote: "Do you know what it is to have a friend in a distant country, to expect news of him, and to wonder from day to day what he is doing,

and whether he is well . . . To watch for Christ is a feeling such as these . . . He watches for Christ . . . who looks out for him in all that happens.”

Routine: the faith is full of routines – just ask an altar server. But those routines can either come to bore us – or they can deepen our faith if we let them. There are unhealthy routines – when the repetition numbs us into forgetting what we are doing and sucks the life out of us. But there are also life-giving routines. We call these traditions. During this season many of us have traditions. Maybe it’s putting up lights and decorating together. Maybe it’s going to that traditional party or play. Whatever it is that do to make the season before Christmas special, if we want it to remain life-giving, let us make sure that we do it WITH Jesus by remembering Him as we do it. If altar servers could remember while serving that they are not just serving the priest and the people, but literally serving Jesus Himself, I hope there would be fewer who grow bored with the service. It’s the same with us adults. Let us connect our activities this Advent with serving Jesus.

In the scriptures of the coming days of Advent we will hear of the saints and prophets who call us to such watchfulness. And the point of the season is to startle us into remembering, not only that He is coming, but has also already come and is among us, if would just look out for Him in all that happens.