

Try to Stay Awake

Mark 13: 24-37

First Sunday of Advent/ 27th November 2005

My grandmother, Ann, whom I grew up with, never liked to admit she had fallen asleep. I can remember many evenings spent with her in front of the television. Around ten o'clock she would slowly start to nod off, wake up, and then fall back to sleep. When she really went to sleep and began to snore, I would say, "MaMa, go to bed, you're sleeping." She would quickly rouse herself, open her eyes wide, and look at me, noticeably angry, and say, "No, I'm not. I'm awake. I'm watching the show. I'm not sleeping." And in a few minutes she would nod off again and awake, nod off and awake, and then be back to sleep again. Johann our cat (I named him after Bach) would be tugging on her to go to bed. Oscar our dog (named by my brother, who loved the Oscar Madison character from "The Odd Couple"), he would bark at her, because, he too, wanted to go to bed. Then I would say again, a little louder, "MaMa, go to bed, you're sleeping." At which she would stir wide-eyed even more disturbed by my desire simply to tell the truth, saying, "No, I'm not. I'm awake." She would never admit she was asleep, even when years later she was in a nursing home and slept most of the time.

These images came to mind this week reflecting upon Jesus' command to "Keep Awake." Jesus says there will come a time, very soon, when they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Jesus wants his disciples to pay attention, to discern the seasons and the times, to be aware of what is coming. Be ready. Keep awake.

To our ears attached to our overworked bodies and minds Jesus' command to stay awake sounds cruel when all we really want is just to go to sleep or get more sleep. We've all, no doubt, read that most Americans are sleep-deprived, working long hours, with hectic family schedules, not getting enough rest. Cramming too much into the day leads to less time for sleep. Doctors tell us we need seven to eight hours of sleep a night, some need even more. More than 200,000 accidents occur each year from drivers falling asleep at the wheel. The 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill was partially caused by a tired tanker operator. Sleep deprivation is costly and takes its toll, adversely affecting our health.¹

¹ See: www.sleepnet.com for more information on sleep deprivation.

The truth is people need more time to rest. The Harvard developmental psychologist wrote a book several years ago with the evocative title, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*.² We are being bombarded with so much information – newspapers, television, computers, books, cell phones, and text messages. The world is changing at a such a fast rate that it is tough to keep up. When we watch television or a movie, we are being bombarded by so many images that its difficult to take it all in, to process it, to think and reflect upon all that we’re experiencing. Do we really take the time to ask ourselves what we’re feeling when we look at the images of earthquakes victims in Pakistan, what are we feeling when we learn about another death in Baghdad, or yet one more shooting in Baltimore City? Several weeks ago, psychologist Nancy Limbaro spoke during adult education time about the importance of getting enough sleep for our own mental well-being, so that we’re equipped to deal with the heavy emotional demands of modern living. She said some people go to sleep watching TV and think they are getting sleep, but studies have shown that they are actually being hypnotized by the images and falling into a hypnotic state and not the deep levels of sleep that the brain requires for health. We’re on sensory overload, over stimulated, and overwhelmed. Retreat centers are very popular today for religious and non-religious types. We need to rest our eyes and minds and bodies. We need sleep. Dorothy laughed when she saw my sermon title, knowing how many people try to do exactly this when listening to a sermon – try to stay awake. If people fall asleep when I’m preaching (and I know who you are) I don’t take it personally, I just figure you need the sleep and sometimes the best thing we can do for our spirits is sleep.

And yet, Jesus says “Keep awake.” Obviously, we can’t be awake 24/7. To go thirty-six, even forty-eight hours without sleep our perceptions of reality itself will start to crack. Yet, Jesus is concerned with reality – your reality and mine and in order to know what is real you need to be awake. *But it’s tough to know you’re awake if you don’t know you’re asleep. How do you know when you’re awake if you don’t know you’re asleep?* This is the predicament of the text. Sometimes people say they’re awake, when they’re really fast asleep. Some people seem to be awake, when they’re really asleep. There are others who are asleep because they’re too afraid to wake up. It is possible to sleep with your eyes open – while I don’t know who you are out there, I do know it happens.

There is the story about a man who knocked on his son’s bedroom door. “James,” he says, “Wake up!” James answers, “I don’t want to get up, Papa.” The father shouts, “Get up, you have to go to school.” James says, “I don’t want to go to school.” “Why not?” asks the father. “Three reasons,” says James. “First, because it’s

² Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

so dull; second, the kids tease me; and third, I hate school.” And the father says, “Well, I am going to give you three reasons why you must go to school. First, because it is your duty; second, because you are forty-five years old, and third, because you’re the principal.”³

Wake up! Wakefulness, we might say, is the primary step and goal at the heart of every religious experience. What will take for human beings to become awake?

The Christian mystic and psychologist Anthony de Mello (1931-1987), once wrote, “Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they don’t know it, are asleep. They’re born asleep, they live asleep, they marry asleep, they breed children in their sleep, they die in their sleep, without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and beauty of this thing we call human existence.”⁴ Tough words. They might even sound judgmental. For, who is to say what wakefulness looks like? Who is to say if a person is sleep-walking through life? Who is to say if a person is spiritually asleep? Surely, this must be one of the great tragedies of life, to live asleep, to die asleep, failing to come awake. This was a fear of mine. I never liked to go to bed early as a child and cherished those nights I could stay up late because I was afraid I was missing out on something. I’m still that way, often wondering to myself, what am I missing?

But who is to say you’re asleep? How do we know of we’re awake? It’s tough to say and I won’t, because it is very subjective, but you know it. I was struck by C. S. Lewis’ (1898-1963) description of his conversion from atheism to theism and finally to faith in the incarnate Son of God. He said, “It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.”⁵ So that awake in Christ, he discovered that what appeared as wakefulness was really being asleep. That’s a beautiful description of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, a process whereby one continually comes awake as we walk with him. When we have sight through Jesus Christ, we realize how blind we were before. When we wake up with him, we realize all along we’ve been asleep. When we walk with him, we are changed and the way we understand reality changes. Our responses to the world change, our attitudes change, our outlooks and actions all change. One theologian put

³ Cited in Anthony de Mello, S. J., *Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality*, edited by J. Francis Stroud, S. J. (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1992), p. 5.

⁴ de Mello, p. 5.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Harvest Books, 1966).

it this way, “Whoever has had a little to do with the Savior always sees something new.”⁶

How do you know whether you’re awake or asleep? It’s tough to say. Implicit in Jesus’ injunction is the fact that there is much in our lives trying to make us sleep and maybe that is the point, maybe that’s half the battle. Remember in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) when the Wicked Witch of the West seduced the Dorothy and her companions with the beauty of poppies that made them slowly fall asleep (until snow comes as grace to break the spell)? We need to be aware of those things in our lives that are trying to put us to sleep. Just think of all the things in our society that are over stimulating us, lulling us into a hypnotic trance, like a narcotic used to sedate us. There’s so much vying for our attention, our time, our energies, our resources that we can’t hear the still small voice of God trying to speak in our hearts. We are overwhelmed, it seems, with bad news, with untold human suffering. It is easy to have compassion fatigue – tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, disease (Thursday is World AIDS Day – 25 million have died since 1981, this morning Africa has about 12 million AIDS orphans). The loss is staggering and mind-numbing; it’s easy for us to fall asleep, to shut down, to not feel. But, if we’re asleep how can we discern reality and even more pressing, how can we discern what God might be doing in the world or within our lives? That’s why Jesus wants us to keep awake, because we’ll miss out on what God is doing.

How do you know if you’re awake or asleep? It’s tough to say. Anthony de Mello says a good place to begin the path toward wakefulness is by being honest, “realiz[ing] that you don’t want to wake up.” Maybe that’s a good place to start, to be aware of the resistance working within us that doesn’t want to wake up reality, the resistance within us and among us to not wake up, but preferring to sleep. But when we’re asleep we’re missing out on life, and what is more, we’re missing out on the God who has come and continues to come to us in Jesus Christ. To miss the coming of the Lord, now that is tragic.

As we begin Advent this morning, maybe this is a good place for all of us to start, with a simple petition. May this become your personal prayer, every day throughout Advent: “*Lord, wake me up.*” Acknowledge deep within that we really resist this kind of prayer because it might actually lead to a change with us...and then do it any way. See what happens. Personally, I would like to hear from you; what have you

⁶ Christoph Blumhardt (1842-1919), *Action in Waiting*, foreword by Rodney Clapp; afterward by Karl Barth (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1998), p. 17

discovered about yourself and God and about the world? So, I invite and urge you to make this your daily prayer throughout Advent, *“Lord, wake me up and keep me awake.”*

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