

Keeping Awake  
Mark 13:24-37

Anne-Marie Jeffery  
November 29, 2020

What do you do when you have to keep awake and your body just wants to go to sleep? Maybe you have homework, or you are waiting for someone. Perhaps there is some task that just has to be done. Often we turn to a cup of coffee, a brisk walk or even turning on the radio.

Keep awake Jesus says to his disciples in the gospel for today. Jesus says this after he has given them some terrible predictions – that the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Yes - my friends this is the reading for the first Sunday of Advent - that season of preparation for Christmas. Usually, these Advent readings find us all caught up in the holiday season. Thanksgiving is over. Christmas shopping is in full swing. We are decorating and planning festivities for the season. It is a busy time.

This year however is different, because even though we are still planning for Christmas, we have had to change so much because of this ongoing pandemic. Plus I don't know about you, but I am tired. Nine months in and we still can't gather in significant numbers. Travel is restricted. We have to wear masks everywhere and still the infections are going up every day. Jobs have been lost. Everything we do has a few more layers of complexity added to it. So many are back to virtual school. Toilet paper is starting to disappear from the shelves again. We have all had more than enough and yet here we are with more to go. I find myself hearing these words from Jesus differently than I have in years past. The sun may not be darkened nor are the stars falling from heaven, but I am feeling a heaviness from being in this place and time.

In many ways we are in a similar situation to the disciples when Jesus was speaking to them in today's gospel. These are the words he says to them right before he is arrested. They know Jesus is in trouble with the religious authorities and that the authorities are most likely planning a move against Jesus. They are worried Jesus isn't turning out to be the Messiah they have longed for all of their lives. They are still living under the oppression of Roman rule. It is a heavy time for them as well.

“They are to stay awake as they do not know the hour when master will come... in the evening...when Jesus will share the last supper with them or at midnight...when the disciples are asleep and Jesus is arrested or at cockcrow...when Peter denies Jesus

or at dawn...as he is sentenced to be crucified"<sup>1</sup>  
and after ... when he is raised from the dead.

And why should they stay awake. Well because the Son of Man is coming in a way they can barely understand. They are to stay awake Jesus is because God is breaking into their broken world. They are to stay awake because God will conquer death. If they do not stay awake, they will miss it and not see the amazing unbelievable gifts that God is bringing. The same is true for us. In the midst of this present suffering, God is breaking into our broken world and if we don't keep awake we will miss it and not see the amazing unbelievable gifts that God is bringing. We will miss our opportunity to proclaim God's presence in this world. But how do we stay awake when we are weary and worn?

Sometimes we do need to sleep or rest. I remember going on a silent retreat and the spiritual director telling the group that was OK to sleep. To be fully in the presence of God, we needed rest. It is kind of like trying to tell a hungry person something. They need food before they can listen. If you are physically tired, can you take a nap or turn off the tv and just go to bed? Get the kids to bed earlier. Are you mentally tired from going going going? How can you stop? Pause? Over Thanksgiving, I picked up my knitting which had been put down for months. Make a craft with your parents/kids. Perhaps that next task can actually wait or doesn't need to get done at all.

Another way we stay awake is prayer. I'm not talking about praying the list of names and concerns we carry in our heart. That's very important, but I am talking about resting in God's presence. I have been using Howard Thurman's 40 days of meditations for my prayer time and this was the prayer that was part of Day 12's meditation.

"Loving God, today let me breathe deeply, let me take time to be still and alone with you; come and surprise me with your precious presence. Amen."<sup>2</sup>

Sit in the presence of God even if it is in the car for 5 min before you go to work or go into the grocery store. Go for a walk with the purpose of spending time with God. Journal. Pray psalm 23 by reading it slowly.

We also stay awake by looking up, being alert and attentive to how God is moving in this world. Have you even seen a baby refuse to go to sleep because there was too many interesting things going on in a room? Be curious. Look at other people. See what is happening. Look at nature. The person in the car next to you. Look for God's presence, because my friends, it is there.

And then proclaim whether it is with action or words. Tell others you have seen God working. Be part of God's work in this world. Is there a community group doing work that inspires you? Make a donation or see if you can help in another way. Make a meal for someone. Make a phone call.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Nyback sermon 11/29/2020 at St. Cross, Hermosa Beach, CA.

<sup>2</sup> 40-Day Journey with Howard Thurman (Kindle Locations 349-350). Kindle Edition.

We are getting ready for Christmas even in the midst of this pandemic and we know what comes with Christmas – God’s love breaks into this world in the form of a baby boy who literally changed this world. As we wait for Christmas, as we wait through this pandemic, as we wait through the brokenness of this world, remember what’s coming – God’s light and love that can overcome the pain of this world. Keep awake because God is coming and here already in so many ways. Keep awake and be part of God’s arrival in this world.