

# Stay Awake

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren  
Sermon for Sunday, November 30, 2008 Mark 13:24-37

Americans are sleepy and getting sleepier. So says the National Sleep Foundation, an organization dedicated to improving public health and safety by achieving understanding of sleep and sleep disorders, and by supporting sleep-related education, research, and advocacy. According to their research, 29 percent of American adults fell asleep or became very sleepy at work in the past month; 36 percent have nodded off or fallen asleep while driving; 14 percent have missed family events, work functions and leisure activities in the past month due to sleepiness; and 12 percent were late to work in the past month because of sleepiness. Darrel Droblich, NSF acting chief executive officer reports, “Nearly 50 million Americans chronically suffer from sleep problems and disorders that affect their careers, their personal relationships and safety on our roads.” That’s a lot of sleepy people.

Why are Americans sleepy and getting sleepier? Various culprits have been named. Some blame the pace and stress of modern life. Some say the cause is our reduced exposure to natural sunlight. Others blame the Internet and other aspects of what they refer to as our new “24 hour round-the-clock culture.” More and more stores and other business are open all night. You can get your groceries at 2 a.m., and then come home and pay your bills on-line at 3. Others point to the wide availability and use of caffeine by adults and many teens.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the sales of medications to help us sleep are also skyrocketing. The number of adults aged 20 - 44 using sleeping pills doubled between 2000 and 2004, and it has continued to rise since. The rate of increase has been even higher among children ages 10 - 19. The pills, however, are hardly a perfect solution. Not only are they expensive and have several potential side effects, but research suggests that the health consequences of relying on sleeping pills night after night are roughly the same as the consequences of smoking a pack a day. Experts recommend developing a sleep routine, avoiding caffeine and alcohol, especially in the hours before going to bed, and spending more time outdoors. Research indicates such changes in routine and behavior are actually more effective over the long run than any medication.

All this matters because being well rested really does improve the quality of our lives. After a good night’s sleep, we see and think more clearly. We tend to be more outgoing and we achieve more at work. We are better at solving problems and avoiding errors. Quite simply, life is better when we are alert.

In our scripture, we heard Jesus urge his followers to “keep awake.” Jesus is speaking near the end of his earthly ministry, and telling those who have followed him that his return will come unexpectedly, and therefore they must always be “on their toes,” so to speak. Living faithfully means being alert.

As we enter the season of Advent, and begin our march through the wild weeks of decorating, shopping, partying and concert-attending that lie ahead, we need to hear this message again. With all the activity swirling around us, all the demands and expectations, it is easy for us to become overwhelmed, try to do too much, and find ourselves exhausted long before Christmas even comes. Many of us stumble groggily across the finish line on December 25th, secretly thankful that the whole ordeal is finally over and maybe – just maybe – we can finally get some extra shut-eye. What a shame it is to make our way through Advent over-scheduled and constantly tired. What a blessing to celebrate this season fully alert.

Jesus told his followers to be alert to the signs. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates,” Jesus said. But what does it mean for us to be alert today? What are we supposed to be looking for?

First, we need to be alert to what God is doing in the world. Where and how is the world becoming more like what God created and intended for it to be? Where are things happening that reflect the divine priorities Jesus shared with us? Where are sins being forgiven and reconciliation taking place? Where are the hungry being fed, the sick healed, the poor and powerless assisted? Where are the little children being welcomed and blessed? Where are the last and the lost and the least being put first? Wherever any of this is happening, God is at work and we should be paying attention.

Sometimes those we help actually pay better attention than we do. On Christmas 2003, a woman came to Friend to Friend, an Episcopal program in San Diego, in the middle of the night. She was homeless, living on the street, mentally ill, addicted and high. She came through the door crying, barefoot and with torn clothes. She had been assaulted and beaten — it was cold and rainy and she had nowhere to go.

She had seen the light of the clubhouse, knew of its reputation and taken a chance that she would find help. The volunteers and clients who were there found her a change of clothes, heavy socks, some old tennis shoes, a new jacket and blanket, food and first aid. She finally stopped crying and said much to everyone’s surprise, “This is such a peaceful place. God must be here with us tonight!”

Of course, God was there that night, and if you had asked the staff before the woman's arrival, they would have admitted it. But it took this woman, this terribly needy, terrifically troubled woman to help them really notice – really pay attention.

Once we are paying attention to what God is doing, we can also be alert to how we can be a part of it. The best way to demonstrate our appreciation for what God is doing is to participate in it. As Jesus' teaching in our text makes clear, the best way to be prepared for the coming of Christ is not to be sitting around staring into the sky. It is, rather, to be busy doing what we are called to do – continuing the work of Jesus.

It doesn't have to be something big or dramatic. In fact, if we wait around for something big or dramatic, we may miss out on dozens of opportunities. The millions of small acts done and small gifts given in the name of Christ are just as important – maybe more important – than the great deeds done by a few. And when we are alert to small opportunities, not just big ones, we find they are all around us. Mrs. Bartholomew, a teacher at Oakridge Elementary School, saw an opportunity when she won a \$150 bounty for her pie at the Utah State Fair. Instead of spending it, she chose to teach her fourth-grade students a lesson about donating to charity. So she divided the prize money among her 30 students and instructed them to write an essay about the charity they chose to donate their share to. The students were eager to fulfill the assignment and searched for worthy causes. Some of the students donated their money to the Katrina evacuees, one student donated the money for school supplies while another made cookies for his elderly neighbors. Mrs. Bartholomew could have just donated the \$150 to a worthy cause herself, but instead she was alert to her opportunity to teach a lesson and involve others. That is what I call being alert to ways we can be a part of what God is doing in the world. Being alert to what God is doing and being alert to ways we can be a part of it are two great ways to "keep awake" during Advent. Here's a third: be alert to God's gifts. Look around, pay attention, open your eyes and your ears and your heart. Above all, give yourself time. One of the great hazards of the holidays is getting so caught up in producing an "ideal" Christmas for ourselves and others, that we never find time to notice or appreciate the simple gifts and pleasures of the season. We spend hours decorating the tree, the house and the yard; we shop till we drop; we attend and host parties, concerts and worship services. But when do we stop, take a deep breath, and let Christmas happen? With all the preparations and activities, we sometimes fall into the error of thinking Christmas depends on us doing things. We start thinking it is up to us to make Christmas happen. But it's not. It never was up to us.

If it had been up to us, it would have happened the first time long before it did. The people of Israel had lived a long time under oppression and domination, hoping and praying for God to send the messiah, the One who would set them free. And many people were busy preparing – the Pharisees teaching the way of righteousness, so that the people might be worthy to have the messiah come; the zealots organizing to destabilize the Roman rulers in their land, expecting the messiah to appear and lead the revolution; and ordinary people like Simeon and Anna praying in the Temple day after day, year after year.

But the timing of the messiah's arrival had nothing to do with what all these folks did. They didn't cause Jesus to be born when he was born. God chose the year, the month, the day, the hour. Jesus came in the "fullness of time." And almost nobody noticed, perhaps because so many were so busy with their own concerns and not alert to that which they could not cause or control.

Be alert, Jesus says. To what? To what God is doing in the world. To ways we may participate in what God is doing. And to God's gifts, freely given – the joy, the peace, the hope, the power – that come to us unexpectedly and not as a result of our own efforts. If we are alert to all this, then Christmas will come in its own time. Maybe not exactly on the 25th, but what does that matter? Christmas will come and we will rejoice in the good news that God is here among us again.

Amen.

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