

“Keep Awake”
Preached by Rev. Tim Moon
11/30/14
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

My Uncle John always brought me the most quirky and fun gifts when I was younger. He was that eccentric, cool relative that was constantly traveling to an exotic destination, and when he came to town, he brought me a treasure from the journey. One Christmas, he bought me an alarm clock, which sounds simple enough, but this is my Uncle John we are talking about. This alarm clock was unique, to say the least. It was a plastic parrot that would rip you from the soundness of slumber with swift efficiency. I can still hear that parrot screaming “Wake up, wake up (squawk)!” The purpose of an alarm clock is to remind you that the time for sleeping is over. It’s time to wake up now. It’s time to shake the sleep from your eyes and come back to the land of awareness.

Noticing matters. Mindfulness matters. Being awake matters. In fact, it is so important that Jesus makes it his final teaching to the disciples in the Gospel of Mark. When I think of Jesus’ final teaching to his disciples, I first think the Great Commission in Matthew “to go,” or the charge to love one another in John, or the resurrected Jesus speaking with the disciples in Luke-Acts. But here, his words are “keep awake” “watch,” or “be alert.” Stay awake...stay awake.

What does it even mean to stay awake in this day and age? Quite literally, I imagine waking up....the moment I awaken...I begin to feel...I begin to sense... I sense my breath moving in and out of my lungs, I feel the warmth of my toes under the covers, I begin to hear birds chirping outside, I begin to see my hands as I rub my eyes, and I smell the aroma and wonder of fresh brewed coffee. Whether I am cognizant of these processes or not, my mind, body, and soul begin noticing the world around it as soon as I awake.

In this season of Advent, staying awake almost seems inevitable. Between the parties, the Christmas shopping, and the time with family, it is hard to fathom finding time to sleep too much.

Keeping awake is more about noticing the world around us and using our mindfulness to react. Holly Sprink writes about the power of noticing in her book *Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness*. She says “A life of faith is not something we float through on a cloud unaware; it is the mindful process of letting God change us, letting him develop our spiritual sensitivity toward the things of God and his kingdom.”¹

First, we should keep awake to ourselves! In seminary, we had to spend a semester doing chaplaincy at Hillcrest Hospital in Waco, TX. Once a week, I would go see patients, and then we would share these experiences with each other. In these verbatims, I would recount a visit in detail with the hope of becoming more aware of my reactions and responses. Questions like “Why did you say that?” “How did that make you feel?” “What from your past made you respond in such a way?” And the goal of these intensive times was to help me become more aware of myself in the moment rather than after the fact.

Because there are so many reasons we may want to sleep to our own awareness. It’s safe. We don’t have to drudge up old feelings. It’s easier to be numb. We are busy. Or it’s just been so long since we have tried to be aware that we are out of practice. Holly Sprink mentions a routine that she and her husband practice each day. They ask each other what did you notice today? Some days it leads to talking about seeing a balloon float into the sky, other days it’s that a colleague offended you, and still others it’s something that your child did. She goes on to say, “Noticing aspects of our world and lives takes practice. It takes a deeper level of awareness than we normally use.”² We don’t just wake up one day magically understanding ourselves, we have to work at it.

But Jesus says, Keep awake...Be alert... Keep awake... We have to keep listening and watching and feeling not only for our own personal growth but in order to connect more deeply with others.

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Jesus gives the command to keep awake directly before his suffering, death, and resurrection. Right before the arrest, Jesus and the disciples go to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he requests that they keep awake and watch. And then they fall asleep! Can you imagine? The Son of God asks them to stay awake, that's it. Just stay awake. And they fall asleep, not once, or twice, but on three occasions. I wondered why it was important for Mark to include this. It seems to me that he was trying to communicate two things. First, it is really difficult to stay awake. And, second, it's really crucial that we do!

Not only were the disciples asleep physically, but they were also completely unaware of what was happening. They were not soaking in their last moments with their Friend, their Teacher. They were not listening to the very important things he was trying to tell him. They were not sensing the grief Jesus was experiencing. They were not seeing the pain across his face. They did not clue into the urgency of his very last teaching to them...Stay Awake. Had the disciples been aware of the situation, they would have seen Jesus' great distress. They would have sensed that Jesus really needed the presence of his friends in that moment.

The depth of our connection with others is intimately connected to our willingness to accept Jesus' call to keep awake. It is then, when we will notice the people around us. When we tune into their needs, their emotions, their joys, their sorrow, their lives. In these times we broaden the small scope of our lives to include the lives of others.

When we choose to stay alert, we may better comfort a friend who is hurting. We may see a grocery store clerk with tired eyes. We may make eye contact with a homeless person who is hungry. We will see the beauty in people, as well as their deep needs. Part of who we are shies away from this type of intimacy, from this type of connection because it may require us to be uncomfortable or to even take action. But being aware of others can be transformative!

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This idea of mindfulness, I believe, is a concept that builds upon itself. As we are more aware of ourselves, we are free to be more aware of others. As we are more aware of others, we become more aware the world around us. We see injustice more clearly. We recognize inequality more quickly. And we offer compassion more freely.

We are to keep aware of THIS world. But I think that staying aware of this world is the most difficult type of mindfulness. Sure, we can begin to think about ourselves and even think about those we encounter each day, but it can be overwhelming to think of the world on a macro level. We can feel detached, uninformed, overinformed, not responsible, inadequate, or myopic. It is hard to be aware of something you can’t easily see, or touch, or hear.

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While the disciples were noticing rocks, Jesus takes this opportunity to open up their spiritual awareness to the coming kingdom. Everything is about to change. What once mattered, doesn't anymore. The structures that once had power, won't any longer. He knows that with his death and resurrection, the kingdom of God will be here. God's hope will no longer reside only in one particular Jewish temple. Instead God's hope will spread throughout the world, and these disciples, his disciples will be the bearers of this hope. God's love is going global.

The word Advent means "coming," so during this time in the life of the church we recognize Jesus' coming as God in human form, but we also remember the promise that he is coming back. We actively wait in this already but not yet tension.

In the midst of hurting, difficulty, and injustice, Jesus is telling us to keep awake. Keep awake to the way things are and keep awake to the way things can be. As bearers of hope, Jesus invites us to participate in a revolution to the way we treat one another and how we value one another. In his sermon "Remain Awake Through a Great Revolution," Martin Luther King Jr. recounts the story of Rip Van Winkle. We remember this classic American tale. Rip goes into the woods, stumbles upon a hidden amphitheater, has a drink, and falls asleep. Upon waking up, he notices that his gun is rusted, and his beard is 20 years old. Can you imagine a 20 year old beard? As he walks back to town, he notices that the picture of King George has

been changed to this fellow from Virginia named George Washington. He slept through the American Revolution! King points out, “and one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.”⁴

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“I’M ANGRY because the stories of injustice that have been passed down for generations seem to be continuing before our very eyes. I’M EMBARRASSED because the looting, violent protests, and law breaking only confirm, and in the minds of many, validate, the stereotypes and thus the inferior treatment.

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teammates, friends and mentors. And it's a beautiful thing.” He goes on to say, “I'M FRUSTRATED, I'M FEARFUL, I'M OFFENDED, I'M SAD, I'M SYMPATHETIC, I'M CONFUSED, I'M INTROSPECTIVE.” At the end he says, “I'M ENCOURAGED, because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse our authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot and burn. BUT I'M ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being...” What beauty and poignancy emerges when we take the time to practice awareness like Benjamin Watson.

Keeping awake to the world around us means staying informed. As you know, our Mission Action Committee has taken an awareness approach. This past year, we have discussed issues of hunger in New Orleans, we have watched documentaries on domestic hunger, and we learned about global hunger through the CROP Hunger Walk. And we have moved into action because of these conversations. Over the coming years, we will use Matthew 25 as a template. We will raise our awareness about the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner, and the sick. And these conversations will change us, will form us, and will lead us to action.

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My Uncle John always brought me the most quirky and fun gifts when I was younger. He was that eccentric, cool relative that was constantly traveling to an exotic destination, and when he came to town, he brought me a treasure from the journey. One Christmas, he bought me an alarm clock, which sounds simple enough, but this is my Uncle John we are talking about. This alarm clock was unique, to say the least. It was a plastic parrot that would rip you from the soundness of slumber with swift efficiency. I can still hear that parrot screaming “Wake up, wake up (squawk)!” The purpose of an alarm clock is to remind you that the time for sleeping is over. It’s time to wake up now. It’s time to shake the sleep from your eyes and come back to the land of awareness.

Noticing matters. Mindfulness matters. Being awake matters. In fact, it is so important that Jesus makes it his final teaching to the disciples in the Gospel of Mark. When I think of Jesus’ final teaching to his disciples, I first think the Great Commission in Matthew “to go,” or the charge to love one another in John, or the resurrected Jesus speaking with the disciples in Luke-Acts. But here, his words are “keep awake” “watch,” or “be alert.” Stay awake...stay awake.

What does it even mean to stay awake in this day and age? Quite literally, I imagine waking up....the moment I awaken...I begin to feel...I begin to sense... I sense my breath moving in and out of my lungs, I feel the warmth of my toes under the covers, I begin to hear birds chirping outside, I begin to see my hands as I rub my eyes, and I smell the aroma and wonder of fresh brewed coffee. Whether I am cognizant of these processes or not, my mind, body, and soul begin noticing the world around it as soon as I awake.

In this season of Advent, staying awake almost seems inevitable. Between the parties, the Christmas shopping, and the time with family, it is hard to fathom finding time to sleep too much.

Keeping awake is more about noticing the world around us and using our mindfulness to react. Holly Sprink writes about the power of noticing in her book *Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness*. She says “A life of faith is not something we float through on a cloud unaware; it is the mindful process of letting God change us, letting him develop our spiritual sensitivity toward the things of God and his kingdom.”¹

First, we should keep awake to ourselves! In seminary, we had to spend a semester doing chaplaincy at Hillcrest Hospital in Waco, TX. Once a week, I would go see patients, and then we would share these experiences with each other. In these verbatims, I would recount a visit in detail with the hope of becoming more aware of my reactions and responses. Questions like “Why did you say that?” “How did that make you feel?” “What from your past made you respond in such a way?” And the goal of these intensive times was to help me become more aware of myself in the moment rather than after the fact.

Because there are so many reasons we may want to sleep to our own awareness. It’s safe. We don’t have to drudge up old feelings. It’s easier to be numb. We are busy. Or it’s just been so long since we have tried to be aware that we are out of practice. Holly Sprink mentions a routine that she and her husband practice each day. They ask each other what did you notice today? Some days it leads to talking about seeing a balloon float into the sky, other days it’s that a colleague offended you, and still others it’s something that your child did. She goes on to say, “Noticing aspects of our world and lives takes practice. It takes a deeper level of awareness than we normally use.”² We don’t just wake up one day magically understanding ourselves, we have to work at it.

But Jesus says, Keep awake...Be alert... Keep awake... We have to keep listening and watching and feeling not only for our own personal growth but in order to connect more deeply with others.

¹ Holly Sprink, *Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2012), Kindle Electronic Edition: Introduction, Location 88.

² Sprink, Location 73.

Jesus gives the command to keep awake directly before his suffering, death, and resurrection. Right before the arrest, Jesus and the disciples go to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he requests that they keep awake and watch. And then they fall asleep! Can you imagine? The Son of God asks them to stay awake, that's it. Just stay awake. And they fall asleep, not once, or twice, but on three occasions. I wondered why it was important for Mark to include this. It seems to me that he was trying to communicate two things. First, it is really difficult to stay awake. And, second, it's really crucial that we do!

Not only were the disciples asleep physically, but they were also completely unaware of what was happening. They were not soaking in their last moments with their Friend, their Teacher. They were not listening to the very important things he was trying to tell him. They were not sensing the grief Jesus was experiencing. They were not seeing the pain across his face. They did not clue into the urgency of his very last teaching to them...Stay Awake. Had the disciples been aware of the situation, they would have seen Jesus' great distress. They would have sensed that Jesus really needed the presence of his friends in that moment.

The depth of our connection with others is intimately connected to our willingness to accept Jesus' call to keep awake. It is then, when we will notice the people around us. When we tune into their needs, their emotions, their joys, their sorrow, their lives. In these times we broaden the small scope of our lives to include the lives of others.

When we choose to stay alert, we may better comfort a friend who is hurting. We may see a grocery store clerk with tired eyes. We may make eye contact with a homeless person who is hungry. We will see the beauty in people, as well as their deep needs. Part of who we are shies away from this type of intimacy, from this type of connection because it may require us to be uncomfortable or to even take action. But being aware of others can be transformative!

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered one of the most famous speeches in American history, but did you know that the "I Have A

Dream” speech almost didn’t happen that day? You see, King had already given that speech in Detroit, and one of his advisors, Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker said the speech was “hackneyed and trite.” Can you imagine if King had listened to his advisors? On the night before the March on Washington, King and his writers decided to remove the “I Have a Dream” segment and replace it with “Normalcy Never Again.” It just doesn’t have the same ring to it. The next day, the steps around the Lincoln Memorial are teeming with people ready to be inspired. Dr. King begins his speech as planned, and as he approaches this pivotal moment, he hears a woman yell “tell them about the dream, Martin.” The woman was gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, a fellow New Orleanian. And the rest is history.³ Whether it was the urging of Mahalia Jackson or a decision King had made as the speech began, he was aware enough to realize that people needed to hear about a dream that day. How easy would it have been to stay on script, regardless of the crowd’s mood? But King allowed the moment to carry him. King allowed his senses to guide him rather than his fears and anxiety. He looked outward to the people. He sensed their needs and was spiritually sensitive to the yearnings of the kingdom of God.

This idea of mindfulness, I believe, is a concept that builds upon itself. As we are more aware of ourselves, we are free to be more aware of others. As we are more aware of others, we become more aware the world around us. We see injustice more clearly. We recognize inequality more quickly. And we offer compassion more freely.

We are to keep aware of THIS world. But I think that staying aware of this world is the most difficult type of mindfulness. Sure, we can begin to think about ourselves and even think about those we encounter each day, but it can be overwhelming to think of the world on a macro level. We can feel detached, uninformed, overinformed, not responsible, inadequate, or myopic. It is hard to be aware of something you can’t easily see, or touch, or hear.

³ Jim Polk "9 Things about MLK's Speech and the March on Washington." CNN, August 28, 2013, accessed November 25, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/28/us/mlk-i-have-a-dream-9-things/>.

If we return to the beginning of chapter 13, Mark recounts Jesus sitting on the Mount of Olives with Peter, James, John, and Andrew. I can imagine them joking and maybe having a contest to see who can throw a stone further than Jesus. On the outskirts of Jerusalem, they have a perfect view of the temple on the horizon. As one of them slings a small rock into the valley, he says "Look Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings." This band of brothers from a fishing village in Galilee are still awestruck by its grandeur. Jesus proceeds to tell his friends that the temple will be demolished, not one of these stones will be left. I can imagine Jesus looking at the temple with his friends thinking, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

While the disciples were noticing rocks, Jesus takes this opportunity to open up their spiritual awareness to the coming kingdom. Everything is about to change. What once mattered, doesn't anymore. The structures that once had power, won't any longer. He knows that with his death and resurrection, the kingdom of God will be here. God's hope will no longer reside only in one particular Jewish temple. Instead God's hope will spread throughout the world, and these disciples, his disciples will be the bearers of this hope. God's love is going global.

The word Advent means "coming," so during this time in the life of the church we recognize Jesus' coming as God in human form, but we also remember the promise that he is coming back. We actively wait in this already but not yet tension.

In the midst of hurting, difficulty, and injustice, Jesus is telling us to keep awake. Keep awake to the way things are and keep awake to the way things can be. As bearers of hope, Jesus invites us to participate in a revolution to the way we treat one another and how we value one another. In his sermon "Remain Awake Through a Great Revolution," Martin Luther King Jr. recounts the story of Rip Van Winkle. We remember this classic American tale. Rip goes into the woods, stumbles upon a hidden amphitheater, has a drink, and falls asleep. Upon waking up, he notices that his gun is rusted, and his beard is 20 years old. Can you imagine a 20 year old beard? As he walks back to town, he notices that the picture of King George has

been changed to this fellow from Virginia named George Washington. He slept through the American Revolution! King points out, “and one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.”⁴

It feels meaningful to have stumbled onto these words on this week in particular. Dr. King’s words ring true in light of the events in Ferguson, Missouri. While each of us in this room may not agree about this situation, our hearts break for all those who are hurting in Ferguson. But what do we notice about Ferguson? I am aware that the wounds of race are still open. Whether explicit or implicit, racism still exists among us, and maybe even within us. And this awareness leads us to notice what stirs within ourselves and how we interact with others.

While the Ferguson verdict came in on Monday, Saints tight end Benjamin Watson was preparing for Monday Night Football in the dome. As his feelings swirled, he decided writing them down would help him express them. Here are a few excerpts of his thoughts,

“I’M ANGRY because the stories of injustice that have been passed down for generations seem to be continuing before our very eyes. I’M EMBARRASSED because the looting, violent protests, and law breaking only confirm, and in the minds of many, validate, the stereotypes and thus the inferior treatment.

I’M HOPELESS, because I’ve lived long enough to expect things like this to continue to happen. I’m not surprised and at some point my little children are going to inherit the weight of being a minority and all that it entails.

I’M HOPEFUL, because I know that while we still have race issues in America, we enjoy a much different normal than those of our parents and grandparents. I see it in my personal relationships with

⁴ Benjamin Watson, "NFL Player Benjamin Watson Reflects on Ferguson in Viral Facebook Post," *NBC News*, accessed November 28, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/michael-brown-shooting/nfl-player-benjamin-watson-reflects-ferguson-viral-facebook-post-n257291>.

teammates, friends and mentors. And it's a beautiful thing.” He goes on to say, “I'M FRUSTRATED, I'M FEARFUL, I'M OFFENDED, I'M SAD, I'M SYMPATHETIC, I'M CONFUSED, I'M INTROSPECTIVE.” At the end he says, “I'M ENCOURAGED, because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse our authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot and burn. BUT I'M ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being...” What beauty and poignancy emerges when we take the time to practice awareness like Benjamin Watson.

Keeping awake to the world around us means staying informed. As you know, our Mission Action Committee has taken an awareness approach. This past year, we have discussed issues of hunger in New Orleans, we have watched documentaries on domestic hunger, and we learned about global hunger through the CROP Hunger Walk. And we have moved into action because of these conversations. Over the coming years, we will use Matthew 25 as a template. We will raise our awareness about the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner, and the sick. And these conversations will change us, will form us, and will lead us to action.

Mindfulness matters. But it also takes practice. During this Advent season, may we take time to be aware of ourselves, others, and the world. Each of you are familiar with an Advent calendar. We gave each of the children one this morning. But I invite each of you to participate in our virtual Advent calendar at #nolakindness #advent on Facebook or Instagram. It is common to give up something for Lent. So how about we do something for Advent. Every day until Christmas, we will post a small act of kindness or an exercise in awareness. We invite all of you to go on this journey with us this season. St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, may we be formed and transformed by Jesus' call to keep awake.

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