

Imagine this -- It's been a long, exhausting day filled with work, obligations, meetings, errands and responsibilities. You were up early and plowed through your "to do" list at work, then you got the kids, or grandkids, to their activities and threw some sandwiches together to eat on the run. Eventually, you made it home only to find more chores to do. Finally, the day comes to an end, and what do you want to do? Fall into bed, relax as your eyes get heavy, and gently slip into a deep, refreshing sleep. It's Sealy Posturepedic time!

But wait! Sound the alarm! Jesus declares in our Gospel lesson this morning that we are to, "Stay awake!" Even as we struggle to keep our eyes open for one more moment, he appears to scoff at sleep, as he commands us to keep alert and to be ready. In fact, if we were to take his words literally you might say that the Lord seems to be telling us to be "insomniac disciples." He says, "But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

I'm sure you have probably heard the popular adage that there is no rest for the wicked, or something similar to it. Well, apparently, there is no rest for the weary either. So, with that being the case, what is a sleep-deprived Christian supposed to do? How are we meant to stay awake when we already live in one of the most sleep-hungry nations in the world? Our 24/7 society with its endless supply of news, social media, and entertainment on-demand allows us to stay up way past our bedtimes as we enjoy "Candy Crush Saga" or watch endless crazy cat videos on YouTube. And recent medical studies have discovered that the lack of sleep in our lives is taking its toll. Employers in the United States complain about workers who doze off in front of their computers or who even fall asleep while operating machinery, which endangers them and everyone around them. Job

performance and worker productivity is suffering because employees show up overtired. And now in our narrative for today Jesus declares that he wants us to "stay awake" even longer?! Ok, if that is the case, then how in the world are we supposed to do that?

Well, we could turn to Randy Gardner for some tips. In 1965 he set the world record for the most consecutive hours staying awake. His feat became sort of the gold standard for staying awake, and it was quickly broken by others including Tony Wright of Cornwall (266 hours), Jim Thomas of Fresno (266.5 hours), and Toimi Soini in Hamina, Finland (276 hours). In 1989, *The Guinness Book of World Records* deleted Toimi's record and the "sleep deprivation" category from its record-keeping because of the concern that a lack of sleep can cause real harm.

Two hundred and seventy-six hours, by the way, is about eleven-and-a-half days! Most of us usually begin getting weary after being awake for 11-and-a-half hours. Which is a good thing, because according to most scientists and doctors, getting enough shut-eye is a vital component for our overall good health. Research focused on sleep deprivation has led to several reasons why it is important to get a good night's rest. Skipping trips to slumberland can lead to: loss of memory, high blood pressure, obesity, slurred speech, impaired decision making ability, and an increased risk of heart attacks.

So why is Jesus telling us to stay awake? Well, okay. We know that Jesus is not *literally* commanding us to avoid a lack of pillow time. Instead, Jesus is saying, "Wake up! Look around! Be aware!" And with that being the case, let's take a look at a few possibilities as to what this might actually mean for us as we explore our Gospel from Matthew this morning.

First of all, let us ponder the idea that Jesus is trying to teach his disciples, both past, present, and future, that they are to be ready! We are not to go through life like sleepwalkers, without noticing what's going on in the world around us. In

other words, it's time for us to open not only our eyes, but also our spirits, so that we can be aware of how God is moving and guiding us through each and every day of our existence in this world. Another way to look at it would be to say that Jesus is offering us a warning against being "asleep at the switch," an expression that originated in the railroad industry. It refers to someone who has missed something important, has not noticed some critical detail, or who might be placing themselves or others in danger because of a lack of attention. If an engineer dozes off while tending the controls that guide the train, it could easily cause a crash. It's vital to "stay awake."

Second of all, Jesus calls us to attention with his urgent message, "Stay awake!," so that we will be ready to respond to the needs around us. We need to stay awake, so that we can notice God at work in our midst. Advent is a time to wake up our spirits, so that we can be aware of God's presence in our lives. Maybe Jesus is not so much telling us to never shut our eyes, as to avoid closing down our spirits.

I think it goes without saying, but there are times in life when we can easily move through each day as though we are in a dream state. We can interact with screens from morning to night while completely avoiding any interaction with other human beings, not to mention the Holy One. We can be plugged into one device, or another, and fill our eyes and minds with news and images, never leaving room for a whisper of the Spirit, or a nudge from a guiding and loving God. We can be lulled into complacency by watching endless loops of music videos or reruns of our favorite TV shows. We immerse ourselves in an ocean of blogs that invite us to click from one link to another. Minutes, and even hours, can go by before we realize that all that internet surfing was perhaps not the best use of our time.

Wake up! What did we miss while we were gazing at yet another episode of *The Crown* or *Law and Order SVU* while scrolling through Facebook as we like, comment, and share people's pictures and posts? In an age when it is possible to have our eyes glued to some screen or another almost 24/7, it may be time to wake up to other possibilities! Jesus commands us to be watchful and *to expect the unexpected*. Jesus talks about a God who will surprise us by coming when we're not looking, when we are not paying attention, or arriving in a guise that we do not expect. This morning's powerful Advent passage reminds us to be aware that the God who came into the world as a baby so many years ago, still wishes to enter our lives today!

Yet, too often we find ourselves possessing attitudes similar to the innkeepers in the Christmas story who turn away Christ with the words, "no room." Our minds are full, our calendars are packed, our expectations are low, so we're not actively looking and seeking for the living Christ in our midst. We're too busy, and our minds are too preoccupied; without even noticing we push Jesus away. And he cries for us to, "Wake up!"

Advent comes with the invitation to open our hearts and our minds to the arrival of the Christ child. If Jesus knocks on the door of our lives, we want to be awake enough to invite him inside. When doing church work, I have often found that it can be easy to get lulled into the complacency of "doing things a certain way because they have always been done that way." Are we going through life in a similar fashion? Are we actively looking for God in the person that we greet at the store, or on the street, or even in our homes? Will we be alert enough to recognize the surprising and humble Christ who arrived not in a grand palace, but in a manger tucked away in a Stable? How will Jesus come to us, and will we recognize him when he does? What can we do during Advent to be more intentional about welcoming the Lord into our lives?

Just as employers implore their workers to make changes in their lives, so that they can be more alert during office hours, Jesus calls us to be aware of the changes we need to make for our own Spiritual and Physical wellbeing. What miracles are we missing simply because we are too distracted to notice? What blessings are passing us by because our minds are consumed with endless details? Are we blindly stumbling through our lives unaware of God's presence all around us?

Jesus' words this morning sound almost like a “contemplative appeal” when we consider what we might be missing. - Wake up -- God is all around you.- Wake up -- you are not alone.- Wake up -- strength will be provided.- Wake up -- don't miss the blessings that are right here.- Wake up -- God is Emmanuel. Jesus is nudging our souls awake and asking us to open our eyes to what is true -- God is breaking into our world. During the season of Advent, we are reminded to be prepared, to be ready, we are to increase our awareness and remember that although we await the coming of the Christ child, God is also with us in Spirit during this time of expectation and anticipation.

Thankfully, we aren't undergraduate or grad students -- Jesus isn't telling us to break out the coffee, energy drinks, and NoDoz tablets so that we can pull an all-nighter. He is instead calling us, and inviting us, to be aware both of the needs around us and of the presence of the living God to help us offer support to those in need. It is a call to action today (wake up -- *now*) instead of tomorrow. Let's not sleep our lives away, but instead roll up our sleeves and answer the call to share the hope of God-with-us.

The extraordinary good news of Advent is that God chooses to be with us. God enters into our world desiring a relationship with us. The bad news: is that we are often unaware of this miracle. The season of Advent should be a time when we take Jesus' call to "wake up" to heart. We can do this by turning off our computer

screens and by setting aside our mobile devices from time to time, so that we can look for God in the people and the places all around us.

Perhaps as we are getting ready to celebrate Christmas we can observe a kind of Winter Lent, as we seek to pray, tithe, read scripture, worship, and nurture our faith as we prepare ourselves for the reason for the season. Maybe we can keep Christmas centered on Christ amid all the commercialization, by stressing the need to keep our daily life centered on him amid all the other demands placed on us by work, family, and our very selves. At the very least we can seek to follow the plan Jesus provides us with today for Advent: Be ready, be awake, and look for the God who promises to come to us. And when Christ does come, shouldn't he be the most important thing in our lives? Amen.