

“Keep awake!”

1. You don't want to have your phone ring at 3am.
  - a. I am not awake at 3am usually. And I don't mean a call at 3am with precision, but I mean middle of the night calls.
  - b. I can think of two calls very specifically which came from family members around that time.
  - c. They are the scariest, most painful kinds of calls ever to get
  - d. One such call notified me that my adult nephew had been kidnapped in Mexico City, and my family was asking for prayer. He is fine today, but that was a terrifying ordeal I'll tell you about it some time.
  - e. One other such call notified me that after a short stay in a hospital near Guadalajara my little brother had died.
  - f. I'm sorry, but how exactly do you go back to sleep after either of those calls?
  - g. The fear kept me awake for my nephew. Prayers. Tears. Stare at the phone numbly waiting for it to ring again, this time with good news.
  - h. The grief kept me awake for my brother. Prayers. Tears. Pick up the phone and call anyone who I thought would be awake to share the news, to swap stories, to remember the good times.
  - i. When it's well after my bedtime, staying awake is not something I can do well, but when calls like these come, well, you just stay awake
2. In the gospel passage, when Jesus speaks of staying awake, he tries to shake us awake so we can STAY awake
  - a. Jesus is trying to convey a sense of urgency to a group of followers, urgency about being prepared for when God's justice would fully be present on earth.
  - b. Interestingly, Jesus uses the story of Noah and the flood to get their attention
    - i. The people in the story of Noah were clueless about the coming flood
    - ii. They were carrying on, disrespecting God's ways, and oblivious to their coming end
    - iii. Only Noah and his family were given the chance to prepare, yet even they didn't know when the flood would come
    - iv. And when the floods came, well, there was no turning back
  - c. Professor Catherine Sider Hamilton writes about wadis, dry river beds in Palestine, Africa, much like what you find in places like Arizona or New Mexico, which can be deceptively calm and devoid of drama.
    - i. She knows of a family who was visiting in Tunisia and decided to have a picnic on one such riverbed.

- ii. Only they didn't know how dangerous it was.
  - iii. Far away from their picnic spot rains had unleashed a flood which traveled at incredible speed, and with no warning a wall of water struck and drowned them.
  - iv. Locals would have known not to picnic on that river bed. Locals would have been watching, always, knowing sooner or later that dry river bed would become a raging river.
- d. Imagine that we lived by that dry riverbed, but somehow we forget about the possibility of flooding.
  - i. If we forget that a flood could come, it would be hard to stay vigilant.
  - ii. We would be caught unaware
  - iii. In our area, considering the 2008 flooding here, we are very keen to stay aware of warnings and preparations if certain rivers rise
  - iv. For Jesus the imagery of the arrival of the Son of Humanity is of an event that would be a life-changing event: the establishment of the Realm of God.
  - v. We speak of it today as the return of Jesus, and you can picture it as a literal or metaphorical event, but it's the new beginning we're hoping for.
  - vi. However, like someone who forgot about wadis flooding, Jesus says there are some who will get it and some who won't.
- e. Earlier the prophet Isaiah was also pointing to a coming event that would shake things up forever, and we as Christian readers of both the passages can't help but link them together in our minds
  - i. The prophet Isaiah had been warning its audience about the threatening enemies armies ready to invade them
  - ii. But then, for a moment, the prophet's mind wanders to the end, the very end, when those armies will come to Jerusalem not to plunder but to worship God
  - iii. What he describes as a vision feels like a dream
  - iv. That day there will no longer be war, because God will settle all arguments
  - v. That day they won't even remember the meaning of war
  - vi. Such that swords won't have use to pierce a body, but will instead open the soil for seed to be planted
  - vii. And spears won't threaten a life but will instead prune a fruit tree
  - viii. Just think of it... the reversal of the ramp up to WWII when entire industries changed whatever they made to make weapons, now it

would be their job to turn tanks into tractors, and the barrel of a rifle will now carry water to irrigate fields

3. In this season of Advent, Jesus and Isaiah are calling us to staying awake to keep watch for an event (both expected and unexpected)
  - a. It is the arrival of God's Realm, of God setting things right with divine justice
  - b. I imagine it's no coincidence that in African American culture, for some time they have used the language of staying awake or staying woke to refer to the kind of awareness of hatred, the alertness to action, and the preparedness which is needed to fight for survival against violence, injustice, and efforts to erase them.
  - c. Maybe you and I only just now became aware of the term.
  - d. The African American community has helped us picture that notion of staying awake, of being woke, as a point of no turning back from the reality of the systemic nature of racism, and the fundamentally true and tragically dismissed notion that Black Lives Matter.
  - e. We can't go back to sleeping, to forgetting those violent realities.
  - f. And consider the pushback against that state of justice wakefulness, a hundred years ago or today, as some deride and weaponize the term "woke," and ask yourself why they would want people to go back to sleep on issues of injustice, of equity, of belonging.
  - g. But like I said, once that 3am phone call comes, who can go back to sleep?!
4. Keep awake, therefore, says Jesus
  - a. Keep awake with a sense of hope that the justice of God is going to prevail
  - b. Keep awake overnight as the ancient sentinels did, keeping watch, as they say, and when their hour of watch ended reporting to the next sentinel what they saw or didn't see
  - c. Keep awake even in the daylight, noticing where it is we see signs that justice is prevailing, where love is overcoming, where we get a glimpse of what it may finally be one day when the Realm of God is among us.
  - d. Keep awake and tell others what you notice, like you're passing on knowledge to the next person taking a shift.
  - e. Keep awake in the days when it doesn't feel like good will prevail
  - f. Keep awake in the days when distractions make us lose focus
  - g. Keep awake
5. In this season of Advent, as we prepare our hearts for the arrival of Jesus Christmas, and for the arrival in God's time of the realm of peace, we let hope keep us centered and connected to God. Because once you're awake, it's hard to go back to sleep.

## Questions for reflection

1. Share a story when you had a hard time staying awake, in spite of it being important that you were awake and ready.
2. In Matthew 24:36-44, Jesus asks us to "keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming... you also must be ready, for the Son of [Humanity] is coming at an hour you do not expect." If we're talking about Jesus returning, why would God want it that way? How would it be different if we DID know when to expect him?
3. We do know when Christmas comes, and yet, what will "keep awake / be ready" mean practically for you this Advent?

## Sources:

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