



Sunday, November 29, 2020

Keep Awake!

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:24-37

If we had lived near our church in the 1880s, then we would have been neighbors with a man named Philander Chase Knox. He lived around the corner on Ellsworth Avenue. (Shadyside Lane was once his driveway.) Philander Knox was a lawyer of some repute, who began life in Brownsville, Pennsylvania. He ended up founding a law firm that is well known in Pittsburgh right down to this day: Knox and Reed then; now, Reed Smith.

Knox also served in the U.S. Senate, and as U.S. Attorney General and U.S. Secretary of State — in the Cabinet of several Presidents, including his lifelong friend, William McKinley, as well as Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. It was Philander Knox who came up with the idea of Federal Income Tax. All in all, he was an interesting neighbor to have.

He is famous for one thing more: falling asleep at Cabinet meetings. Yes, some folks say he was working too hard. Others claim it was due to the brain drain that such meetings cause. Still others say it was a medical condition. No matter; there they would be, gathered round a big table, with weighty matters to discuss, and important decisions to be made — and Mr. Knox would simply nod off. He did it so often that his nickname in Washington, D.C., was “Sleepy Phil.” And not incidentally, the world’s most famous sleeping groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, was named in his honor.

A dubious distinction, if you ask me. “Mr. Knox, what are you famous for?” Answer: “Sleeping.” Oh, then you join the ranks of other famous sleepers: Sleeping Beauty, for instance. Rip Van Winkle. Winston Churchill was a proponent of the siesta; he took a two-hour nap every day at 5:00 p.m. Other illustrious nappers include Thomas Edison, Leonardo da Vinci, Napoleon, John F. Kennedy, John D. Rockefeller, and Salvador Dalí. So you could say that Philander Knox caught his ZZZs with the best of them. But I wonder if the dogs here in Shadyside recognized him, when at last he woke up?

Mr. Knox needed his sleep. We *all* need our sleep. But when it comes to being a Christian, Jesus wants us to keep awake. He says so, in the Gospel of Mark. Why? Because the master may come at any hour. We are to be awake and alert every hour. *“What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”*

Short of swallowing too many of those high energy drinks — which, by the way, are also highly detrimental to your well-being — how do we do what Jesus says? How do we keep awake?

I like the way United Methodist minister and author Robert Schnase puts it. He calls it “spiritual attentiveness.”

“For Jesus to repeat [the words “Keep awake”] so emphatically, three times in a row [in Mark chapter 13], implies that one of the great hazards of the faith journey is spiritual acquiescence, a kind of grogginess that dulls us to what is true, and truly important. Sleepiness of spirit means we miss out on what God is doing, and perhaps overlook the presence of Christ right in our midst. By simply falling asleep, spiritually speaking, we miss God, and miss out on what God is calling us to be and do.”

“Spiritual attentiveness” means to look for what God is doing. God is always doing something new. God is always reminding us about what God did in the past. God is always prompting us to get busy for the future. God is bringing about eternal plans. Nearer and nearer draws the time, as the hymn says. How much nearer is known not to you or to me, but only to God. Even Jesus does not know.

Advent is a time when we look for what God is doing, specifically, in bringing the Messiah into the world. So as Advent begins, as it does today, we look for the presence of Christ in our midst. He’s coming.

We help our children pay attention to this when we have an Advent calendar at home and they can count down the days. We help ourselves pay attention to this when we light our Advent candles, and one week leads to the next and the next, until finally it is Christmas Eve.

Similar to what one might do to stay awake physically, the way of “spiritual attentiveness” includes getting up and moving around to be spiritually awake. Throughout the Bible, God called people to get up and move around, from the days of the Exodus, to the call of the prophets. Getting up and moving around helped to fulfill God’s purpose. Jesus came on the scene and said to people: “Follow Me.” It would have been impossible for them to follow Jesus if they had said, “Sure enough, Lord, I will follow You, but from here in my fishing boat, where I have always been.” Jesus called them to get up, out of their routine, to move around Galilee and Judea, and to engage in new kinds of relationships that had, at their core, a divinely-driven cause. God is calling us today, to get up, and move around, so we will keep awake and be spiritually attentive, especially in this Advent season.

Another way to be spiritually attentive is to give our eyes a break, to avoid fatigue — that is, to look and see what we haven’t seen yet. If we watch where we are going, we will go where we are watching. If our eyes have been on something less than the cause of Christ, quite possibly we have been doing the spiritual equivalent of nodding off during Cabinet meetings, more worn out from that brain drain than is good for us.

A friend of mine had a neighbor who is a dear soul but who also is a constant presence; she yoo-hoos to him whenever he is in his driveway, or doing yardwork. She comes half-way across the street and engages him in a conversation that has a James Joycean stream of consciousness about it, going from one topic to the next in rapid succession, without coming up for air to allow my friend to get a word in edgewise. He once said to me that, when she starts talking, his eyes roll up into the back of his head and never come out. That can happen to us — when we have been looking, far too long, where God cannot be seen, where the cause of Christ is obscured by demanding minutiae, where the tyranny of the immediate fogs up our view of God’s landscape. Give your eyes a break; look somewhere new to avoid spiritual fatigue.

One more thought about spiritual attentiveness: start a conversation to wake up your mind — a conversation with other believers. These dear and wise followers of Jesus who are in your life already — friends from church, friends from church history — they can bring forth some ideas that will engage you in the development of your beliefs. Befriend a believer with whom you can talk about eternal things.

Try this. Engage in a dialogue with inspirational people, of today and of long ago. This kind of conversation happens in the heart, not aloud. For instance, read a passage from John Knox or John Calvin. Then, make a note. Comment on it, as if you were having a conversation with them. Then listen for an insight that comes back to you. Find a devotional guide, whose words you can read each day during Advent. The same is true of the conversations you can have today, with fellow Christians. Reach out to someone who will hear you, and respond in ways to keep you awake in Christ Jesus.

Every night before I go to sleep, I set two alarm clocks. They are set to the same time. So why two? I do this because one is plugged in to the wall, but the other is not. It is a kind of backup plan for being awake, so that, if one kind of power goes out, the other one will still do its job of waking me up. In our Scripture, Jesus is teaching about the end times. We are not there yet. In the in-between times, the Lord’s watchword to us is to do more than one thing:

- Get up and move around.
- Look to see what we haven’t seen yet.
- Start a conversation to wake up our minds.

Do all that we possibly can to keep awake. Amen.