

From the Pulpit

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“Wake Up Call!”

Psalm 78:1-7, 1 Thessalonians
4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

November 9, 2014

By Rev. Dan Clark
Interim Associate Minister

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Good morning. Is everyone awake? Or are there a few sleepy worshipers gathered here today?

No, I'm not referring to a late night watching Ohio State's primetime win at Michigan State. I'm talking about the times we find ourselves in. Dark times.

And no, I'm not talking about Tuesday's election results.

I'm talking about the Daylight Savings Time hangover. These are dark days. Last Sunday it was wonderful to get that extra hour of sleep. But as the week went on, we all remembered that the end of Daylight Savings Time means the beginning of early sunsets and longer nights. The days are darker. The sun came up at 7:09AM this morning and will set at 5:20PM. Just over 10 hours of daylight. The days are getting darker. Sometimes that can make it hard to wake up; it can make it hard to stay awake.

This morning's parable is a story of 10 bridesmaids waiting for the wedding party to begin. There are 5 who planned ahead and brought plenty of oil to keep their lamps burning through long hours of waiting, and 5, well, burnouts. This story comes in the midst of what some refer to as Jesus' Apocalyptic Discourse. Sounds scary, doesn't it? He is letting his disciples in on what to look for in the coming dark days, in the wake of a cosmic time change.

Jesus has left the temple where he was handing out woes, a litany of criticism, to the scribes and Pharisees, calling to account the religious elite for their hypocrisy and heavy-handedness. And as he leaves that verbal altercation, he ups the ante when he tells his disciples to look out for the destruction of the Temple, every stone thrown down. If you take a few minutes to read Matthew chapters 23, 24, and 25, you'll have no doubt why a plot to have Jesus eliminated emerged from the camps of the political and religious elites of the day. This divine peace maker was definitely playing rough.

Jesus' disciples have initiated further conversation with a question. And he listens to their question. This is important. We talk a lot in the United Church of Christ about our Stillspeaking God. And we should. Perhaps, too,

we have a Still-listening God. Jesus was listening, and so the disciples ask him, when are all these things you're talking about going to happen, and how will we know they're about to happen?

Then Jesus sits down with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, his favorite metropolitan park with his closest friends. From this vantage point, high above the city he loves... a city suffering from religious oppression, a city struggling with poverty, a city where the political leaders are focused on maintaining their power-hungry oligarchy, not focused on the needs of the people they supposedly lead and serve. From this vista, on Olive Mountain, he tells some scary stories – stories about tribulation and lawlessness, stories about false prophets and false saviors, stories about bridesmaids who are ready for the party and bridesmaids who are left in the dark.

These are dislocating texts, disarming stories.

And at the end of the parable of the ten bridesmaids, Jesus says... “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Keep awake.

What do you hear there? Do you hear scolding and judgment? What does this wake up call feel like? Does it feel like a blaring alarm when you're deep in REM sleep and dreaming beautiful dreams of puppy dogs and Big Ten championships? Does it feel like a cruel prank when someone quickly opens the blinds and bangs pots and pans together to wake you up?

How does it feel to hear Jesus say, "Keep awake"?

I think we're hearing Jesus' words wrong if we hear scolding and judging, scowling and jeering. I think we're hearing Jesus' words wrong if we hear alarm clocks and pots and pans. These are the words of an infinitely merciful person, a completely loving person, a person acquainted with the pain of dark days, a person familiar with all that is lost when the sun sets.

Let me ask again, how does it feel to hear a Still-listening and Stillspeaking God say, "Keep awake"?

It's an interesting word in the original Koine Greek language of Matthew's gospel. Keep awake. *Gregoreo*. It means to be on the lookout, to be active and attentive. It

means to be ready for some sudden and possible problem. It comes from the root word, *egeiro*. This means to rise up. To rise up from sitting, sleeping, or dying even. It means to stir up. It is a word for marches and rallies and petitions and revolutions. It is also a word that could mean “to come out”. All of this together can create both a moving and merciful moment when we hear again the words, “keep awake”.

Get up, stand up, stir up, shake up, come out, and rise up! Wake up! Be fully present, fully alive, fully aware! Be yourself and be here now! Wake up!

Is everyone awake? Is anyone still sleepy?

Our lives have plenty of ordinary and mundane moments when the time ticks by slowly. But we actually really measure our lives by the pivotal moments. Yes we have clocks and calendars and check books to keep track of the details. But these are measurements of *chronos*. Really we measure our lives by *kairos*: the moments full of God and glory and love and beauty.

So the question is, when the alarm is sounding, when the blinds are open, when there is a knock at the door, what do

you do? You have a couple options. You can sleep through it, like I did for some of my 7:30AM economics classes my freshman year of college. (Was I the only one?!?) You can hit snooze and roll over, like some of us will do tomorrow, on Monday morning. Or you can wake up and join our Stillspeaking God in the experience and expression of a powerful agenda of life and love for all. These are the three things you can do when you hear the words, “wake up!” – sleep, snooze, or come alive! Will you wake up?

Let me give you some examples if things we need to be awake for...

The Polar Vortex is coming. Wake up. It will be in the 30s by the end of the week. It might even snow next Sunday. First, let's all grumble and complain for a second. Now that that's over, it's time to wake up. Just like Jesus' words, this warning is merciful, not judgmental. Get ready. Times are changing. Cold is coming.

Another example...

Imagine more. The Stewardship Committee has asked us to wake up to a hopeful future, to open our eyes wide to the possibilities waiting for First Church. More resources are

necessary to live our legacy as a center of social justice, a sanctuary of beautiful art, music, and architecture, as a community with radical hospitality and openness. So will you get up, stand up, stir up, shake up, come out, and rise up to the call to imagine more in your giving in 2015 and beyond?

Another example...

My son, Jude, plays soccer for one of the Crew Juniors teams. He usually plays about half the game in goalie. I must admit sometimes I don't even bother to bring my camp chair. I can't sit down. I'm cheering him on... "Look alive, keeper! Here they come on a breakaway! Make the save!" I don't wake him up with my shouting because I want him to fail. It's because I want him to succeed. I want him to be ready.

Is anyone still sleepy? Is everyone ready? Is everyone awake? When Jesus tells us to wake up it's so that we'll be ready, so that we'll live fully into our hopeful future, so that we'll make the save.

Allow me to read to you a selection from Annie Dillard's Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, published in 1974...

When I was six or seven years old, growing up in Pittsburgh, I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. It was a curious compulsion; sadly, I've never been seized by it since. For some reason I always "hid" the penny along the same stretch of sidewalk up the street. I would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped-off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD or MONEY THIS WAY. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe. But I never lurked about. I would go straight home and not give the matter another thought, until, some months later, I would be gripped again by the impulse to hide another penny.

It is still the first week in January (or we could say, the second week of November), and I've got great plans. I've been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see,

unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But—and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny? If you follow one arrow, if you crouch motionless on a bank to watch a tremulous ripple thrill on the water and are rewarded by the sight of a muskrat kid paddling from its den, will you count that sight a chip of copper only, and go your rueful way? It is dire poverty indeed when a person is so malnourished and fatigued that he or she won't stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get.

Do you have big plans? If you're planning on looking around... if you're planning on finding the gifts and surprises that are waiting for you, like a penny on the sidewalk... if you're hoping to hold your hands open to receive the grace and love of God... then, as Jesus mercifully invites us, keep awake. Get up, stand up, stir up, shake up, come out, and rise up! Wake up! Be fully present, fully alive, fully aware! Be yourself and be here now! Wake up!

Gifts abound if we're not sleepwalking through life. If we're not slumbering and shuffling our way through the days of

the week, we'll find there's much to see. Are you ready for it?

Ready like bridesmaids prepared for the wedding celebration to begin... Ready like Jesus' disciples faced with changing and challenging times... Ready like a northerner surviving darker days... Ready like a warm-blooded mammal bracing for the Polar Vortex... Ready like a church imagining more generosity... Ready like a goalie positioned to make a save... Ready like an author planting pennies and planning on seeing... Ready like the ordinary people of an extraordinarily Loving God...

Are you ready? Are you awake?

Amen.

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