***STAY AWAKE TO SLEEP IN PEACE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

December 1, 2019

Texts: Matthew 24:36-44 and Isaiah 2:1-4

“Keep awake,” says Jesus. I’ve thought about quoting those words of Jesus to you each week just prior to the sermon – it is biblical, you know – kind of an eschatological warning about sleeping at the wrong time and in the wrong place – like the pew on Sunday morning! But Jesus doesn’t confine that command to Sunday mornings or any other mornings for that matter. It is a command for all our days and nights and places and times: “Keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” No one knows the time, says Jesus, not the angels or the prophets or the preachers or the mathematicians or the astrologers or the fortune tellers or Hal Lindsey or even the Son of Man himself. He might come at any moment, perhaps at this moment or the next or just before the benediction. So, keep awake!

It has been 2,000 years since Jesus uttered those words, and for 2,000 years Christians have been trying to stay awake as Jesus commanded with decidedly mixed results. Sometimes we wait expectantly, sometimes impatiently, sometimes distractedly, sometimes unconsciously, and sometimes just poorly. It seems like a long time to keep awake and stand ready, and it especially seems like a lot to ask just three days after Thanksgiving. We need time to recover from the Thanksgiving turkey hangover and the Black Friday stampede and the Virginia-Virginia Tech football game before we dive into Advent and the waiting and the staying awake, except that the church calendar gives us no such break and neither does Jesus. So, here we are on the first Sunday in Advent with the remnants of a pumpkin pie still on the counter at home, hearing yet again: *Keep awake for you do not know when the Son of Man is coming!*

Jesus’ words make a pretty broad assumption of us. ***Stay awake*** infers that we are already awake and not sleeping on the job. ***Stay awake*** implies that we have been watching vigilantly for his coming and should continue to do so. ***Stay awake*** suggests that we are ready and need to ***stay*** ready in case he comes some time soon, like today or tonight or tomorrow. So perhaps it is fair to ask: Are you trying to stay awake or do you first need to wake up?

George McLeod was a Glasgow pastor who founded a community on the island of Iona in 1938 and rebuilt the abbey there in order to provide a place for respite and inspiration for folks to be empowered for ministry in the world. Iona has been described as a *thin place*, one of those holy places where heaven and earth are very close together. Having spent a night there, I can attest that it seems like an accurate description. Some years ago the Iona Community published a collection of Rev. McLeod’s prayers entitled, *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory;* among those prayers are these words that seem to suggest that he suspects most of us are sleeping:

*It is high time to awake out of sleep;*

*For our salvation is nearer at hand than when first we believed.*

*We confess that we sleep*

*when we think the world is as it always was.*

*It is high time to awake*

*to the truth that Jesus has come.*

*His summons is urgent in our midst.*

*Nearer than we know He is coming in judgment.*

*He might come in judgment this Christmas.*

*We confess that we sleep*

*when we think that power is still of this world.*

*It is high time to awake*

*to the truth that His power alone is working permanently.*

*All the civilizations [built] in scorn of His power*

*are as if they had never been.*

*And our civilization with them will equally go down.*

*Nearer than we know He will be seen coming in power.*

*He might come in power this Christmas.*

*We confess that we sleep when we think that His glory is veiled.*

*He has been seen, He has died, He has risen, He reigns.*

*It is high time to awake to the truth that His glory is manifest*

*in all the deeds that sweeten, in all the thoughts that help.*

*Nearer than we know He will be seen coming in glory,*

*to exalt the humble and meek*

*and to cast down the mighty from their seats.*

*He might come in glory this Christmas.*

*And we…we accept the ways of this world and its judgments.*

*We accept the power of this world despite their obvious bankruptcy.*

*We accept the tinsel, the gold and the glare despite their emptiness –*

*Till with this world’s eyes we see Christmas coming as a carnival,*

*And not as a confusion of face.*

*Give us grace to wait in spiritual expectancy*

*His coming again to practice true humility;*

*to be exercised in the ways of real power,*

*to express His glory:*

*That, we may recognize the kingship of a cradle,*

*the royalty of being ruled, the seniority of service.*

*So that should He come this Christmas,*

*His body bloody but His head crowned,*

*We would be found among those who worshipped*

*and not among those who would kill.*

*If these things would be: it is high time to awake out of sleep.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

Are you awake or are you still sleeping on Jesus’ coming? “Keep awake,” Jesus says, but perhaps he should have said, “Wake up!” Wake up to what I have taught you and showed you about how you are to live and forgive and love one another. Wake up to the promises that I offer for your forgiveness and salvation, promises that should inspire hope in your day to day living! Wake up to the suffering in the world – in Ebola-stricken nations in Africa, in Syrian refugee camps, among immigrants at our border, among opioid addicts in our community, and in the homes of child abusers down the street. Wake up to the poverty which brings despair and death to people in inner cities and mountain hollows alike. Wake up to the racism and nativism that are perpetuating injustice and violence against individuals and whole communities of people, not just in this nation but around the world. Wake up to the violence that plagues our nation and world as plowshares are beaten into 21st century swords and pruning hooks into semi-automatic weapons while video games and movies exalt graphic killing as entertainment. Wake up to the changing climate that threatens not only ways of life but life itself with rising tides and powerful storms that disproportionately impact the poor and powerless worldwide.

Wake up, says Jesus, for you do not know the hour of the coming of the Son of Man. Wake up and be ready for my coming by doing something about those things that are not the way they are supposed to be, those things that are not the way God intended them to be, those things that are not the way you should tolerate them to be. Wake up and beat swords into plowshares and 21st century spears into pruning hooks. Wake up and feed those who are hungry, clothe those who are naked, visit those in prison, and give clean water to all those who are thirsty, before they die! Wake up and fight injustice, corruption, and oppression with whatever tools are at your disposal wherever you are, for that is how you prepare for my coming – by doing what I have called you to do! Wake up and be my faithful disciples, says the Lord! It is high time to wake up! Then stay awake, for I am coming soon, he says.

If you knew that Christ was indeed coming in glory soon, say next week, what would you do? What Jesus wants you to say is that you would do exactly what you are already doing – loving God and neighbor in tangible and intangible ways to the glory of God. What Jesus wants you to say is that you would rejoice in his coming rather than fear his arrival! What Jesus wants you to say is that you would prepare for his coming in glory with even greater fervor than you prepare your homes for Christmas! What Jesus wants you to say is that the gifts you would offer him are already being offered – gifts of love and justice and righteousness. For as we treat our neighbors so we treat Christ; as we welcome children and strangers, so we welcome Christ; as we serve our neighbors in need, so we serve Christ.

My brothers and sisters, it is high time to wake up and to stay awake, stay alert, stay faithful, for the Lord is coming. Some time, any time, at an unexpected hour in an unexpected place, like a manger in Bethlehem on a silent night, he is coming soon! So be prepared for his coming, be ready – and then because you are already ready, may you sleep in peace! Amen

1. George F. McLeod, “Awake Out of Sleep!” in *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory*, Wild Goose Publications: 1985, pp.17-19 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)