

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 27, 2022

Wake Up!

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of my fundamental beliefs about humanity is that in the end we are incredibly lazy. Actually, let me be more specific, our **brains** are lazy. By this I do not mean that we are unwilling to do hard mental work or anything along those lines. But rather I mean our brains prefer the familiar and convenient. This is part of the reason that habits are so very difficult to change.

Neuroscience even bears this hypothesis out fairly conclusively. A study in the journal *Neuropsychologia* from 2018 concludes that even thinking about being active requires more cortical resources (mental energy) than thinking about being sedentary!¹ Going a bit further into long-established neuroscience we will also discover that our brains largely prefer to take shortcuts and follow well-worn neural pathways in order to minimize “cognitive load.” In other words, when presented with new situations, information, or problems, our brains will seek the nearest reference it can find from past experience regarding the “new something” and follow those already established patterns rather than forging new (perhaps more accurate) neural pathways.²

What does this have to do with the Gospel text we read today and the apocalypse? Everything! One of the byproducts of our brain's laziness is that we (especially as we get older) often move through life largely on autopilot. If you were here a couple of Sundays ago you may recall that I pointed out that the word “apocalypse” has its roots in the Greek word for revealing or unveiling.³ In the Gospel reading today we understand that what is being

¹ Boris Cheval, Eda Tipura, Nicolas Burra, Jaromil Frossard, Julien Chanal, Dan Orsholits, Rémi Radel, Matthieu P. Boisgontier, Avoiding sedentary behaviors requires more cortical resources than avoiding physical activity: An EEG study, *Neuropsychologia*, Volume 119, 2018, Pages 68-80, ISSN 0028-3932, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2018.07.029>.

² Sweller, J. (1988), Cognitive Load During Problem Solving: Effects on Learning. *Cognitive Science*, 12: 257-285. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4

³ ἀποκάλυψις, meaning an unveiling, uncovering, revealing, revelation. Strong, J. (2010). *The new Strong's expanded exhaustive concordance of the Bible* (Red letter ed.). Thomas Nelson.

unveiled or revealed is the coming of the “Son of Man.”⁴ And it would not do for us to be caught unaware of this coming.

If, however, we generally live our lives on autopilot, how on earth will we be ready for this coming? Jesus tells his followers emphatically, multiple times in the Gospels, that we need to “keep awake”⁵ lest we be caught unawares by this coming. Living our lives mostly on autopilot, it seems to me, would be the exact opposite of keeping awake!

The most frustrating piece of all of this is that when we are awake, when we’re not moving through life on autopilot, we are healthier and more whole human beings. When we aren’t just mindlessly moving through life based on already established patterns and habitual ways of thinking we are more who we were made to be. Being awake and conscious of our living, of our experience of the world around us, of all the ways in which we are connected to creation, is the life we were made for.

“Keep awake!” Jesus warns, for if you are asleep you might be caught off guard by the coming of the Son of Man. Here’s the thing, I believe the Son of Man is constantly coming to us. The apocalypse is already happening. Not in some distant far-off future calamity. But rather in the unveiling of God’s presence and activity in the world around us. In the revealing of how we do not live as we were made to live.

Sure, we confess that a time will come when all things will be remade. But who’s to say how long that remaking might take? Who’s to say that the remaking isn’t going on right now? And would it be such a shock to find out that we miss God’s current remaking because we are asleep to it?

Wake up! The Son of Man is coming...right here, right now. The Son of Man, who revealed to his followers what being awake means. The Son of Man who calls on us to live intentionally, conscious of our connections and community. The Son of Man who taught us that our main purpose in life is to love God and love one another. That Son of Man is right here, right now; do you see him?

God is unveiled to us in the kind words or actions of a complete stranger. God is revealed in loved ones gathered around a dinner table for a shared meal.

⁴ Matthew 24:27, 30, 37 (all scripture quotations are from the NRSVUE)

⁵ c.f. Matthew 24:42, 25:13, Mark 13:35, 37, 14:34, 37-38

God comes to us in the broken, the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the stranger, if only we are awake to God's presence.

So, wake up my siblings in Christ, and try to keep awake! How? Live with intention. Set God's law of love in your hearts and minds. Break the old habits that keep you focused inwardly, the habits that keep you asleep. Slow down, turn off the autopilot, and really look at the world around you. See the sunbeam streaming down to land on your neighbor. Sense the presence of the humanity gather around you today. Feel your breath, the breath that sustains you, the breath that comes from God's *pneuma*, God's very Spirit. Wake up to the presence of the divine in you and in all living things.

It's not easy being awake, it takes effort, and it takes a lot of unlearning of bad habits. I tend to think I'm doing great when I feel I'm awake for 60% of my day; living with intention and trying to remain conscious of the blessing of life in me and in the world around me. And when I am awake, I am amazed to find the Son of Man coming to me quite regularly. Christ comes to me in friends and family, in neighbors, in opportunities to serve others, in the beauty of creation, even in the broken parts of the world Christ comes and offers healing and wholeness. Christ invites us into the work of apocalypse. Christ draws us to works of compassion and healing for others and the world. Christ calls us into an awareness of life and love.

Wake up to the Incarnation. Wake up to Immanuel. Wake up to God-who-is-with-us. Wake up to the coming of the Son of Man. Wake up to God's very presence in your life. Wake up to the scandal and unpredictability of God in human form. Frederick Buechner wrote, "Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in the stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too."⁶

That is the promise of our stubborn, loving, Incarnational God. There is nowhere God will not go to reach us. There is nothing God will not do (short of forcing us into compliance) to bring us back into right, healthy, whole

⁶ Buechner, Frederick. "The Face in the Sky." <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2019/12/24/weekly-sermon-illustration-the-face-in-the-sky>

relationship. God is constantly coming to us, revealing God's persistent love for us. God wants you to be whole. God wants you to be healthy. God wants you to be who God made you to be. God wants you to see how loved you are, and how loved the world is. God wants you to participate in God's love for the world. But none of this can happen when we are on autopilot, when we are asleep. And so, Christ begs us to wake up! Amen.