

Mark 13:24-37 - New International Version

²⁴“But in those days, following that distress,
“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
²⁵the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’^(a)
²⁶“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and
glory. ²⁷And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the
ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.
²⁸“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves
come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹Even so, when you see these things
happening, you know that it^(b) is near, right at the door. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this
generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹Heaven
and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the
Son, but only the Father. ³³Be on guard! Be alert!^(c) You do not know when that time
will come. ³⁴It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in
charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.
³⁵“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will
come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at
dawn. ³⁶If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷What I say to you, I
say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Awake, Aware, and Alert

Introduction

The Gospel reading today is about observing what is going on in the world and living in a way that cultivates perception and preparedness for whatever may come in life. The Gospel repeatedly reminds us to be wakeful, watchful and ready. We are called to ask, “What is going on around us?”

In today’s message, I’m just going to touch on the ideas of being awake, aware and alert, but before I go into them, I want to highlight that each of these modes of consciousness has an inner and outer dimension. We can be aware of the outer world, but not of what is going on inside of us — like being at a party and realizing all of a sudden and too late that we have been slowly drinking way more than we should. On the other hand, we can be so absorbed in our internal struggles sometimes that we are oblivious to the outside world — like daydreaming in front of the stove while the dinner burns. These are symptoms of being half-awake or unaware or unprepared. We recognize the symptoms when we are surprised by something unexpected knocking us out of our sleepy, distracted, unready state of mind. How do we cultivate a state of

being alive that is awake, aware and alert, both inwardly with our spiritual lives, and outwardly in the material and social realm?

Awake

I was fortunate to be able to help some friends yesterday with moving furniture into their house in preparation for the birth of their fourth child in February. There were awkward angles and staircases to navigate with large bulky bed frames and mattresses. It was a lot of work, but there was a sense mission and purpose through it all. The act of preparing a home for a newborn child is one of those sacred tasks that is full of anticipation. Once a woman knows that she is pregnant, a timer starts running. You don't know the day or the hour of the baby's birth, but you know it's coming and you have to be ready, you have to get your house in order, as best you can. If the family were to ignore the fact of pregnancy until the 8th month, that would be a problem, especially if the child arrived early. Nature, in this sense, gives us ample opportunity to be awake to what is going on. The signs of pregnancy are embodied to a degree shared with few other experiences in life. Cravings for certain kinds of foods or revulsion to certain smells are part of the embodied intelligence that so often is ignored in other circumstances, but which push themselves to the fore at this time. The body is telling the mother to, "wake up," you need this nutrition, or you need to have your home ready.

Our culture is very good at keeping us in a state of sleepiness. Do we do things out of habit alone, or do we examine our routines and habits from time to time to ask if they are beneficial? Do we look to authorities to tell us what to eat, what to think, who to like or dislike, or do we form our own opinions through examining the issues that affect us deeply in the light of Christ's message?

Being awake is essential to a healthy life. We must sleep every night, sinking into unconsciousness so our bodies can have a time of restoration. Sleep is necessary, but we are not to sleepwalk through life.

When we sleepwalk through life, our government can fund both sides of a war and we'd never know it. When we sleepwalk through life, our planet can be turned into a toxic dump without us realizing until its too late. When we sleepwalk through life, we can be slowly poisoned by our own lifestyle choices without realizing until we are sick.

Jesus said, ⁵⁵ **"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ⁵⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.**

Be awake.

Aware

Awareness is another quality that is essential for us as Christ's followers and for anyone seeking to become a human being.

In movie, the Seven Samurai, a group of samurai are trying to find a warrior to join their ranks. They devise a test where they invite men into a room. Behind the door, a young samurai hides with a drawn wooden sword, ready to strike whoever enters. One candidate enters and immediately he is struck on the head. He was unaware of the danger. Another candidate enters, a strong, worthy samurai, and as soon as he enters the door, he perceives the danger, avoids being hit and disarms the young man with the wooden sword. That samurai was more aware and ready than the other, but still he was not the candidate they were looking for. Finally, another candidate is invited in. He steps up to the doorway and hesitates. Then he takes a step back and smiles and asks what kind of a trick is being played on him. His awareness is so finely honed, he knows something is amiss before he even enters the room. He had cultivated a heightened state of awareness.

What do you do to cultivate awareness within and without?

I've seen lots of trees with shriveled brown leaves in the summer, as if they are suffering from drought, even though there was plenty of rain. What is happening here?

It seems to me that young people have a harder time making eye contact when they are having a conversation than they used to? What is happening here?

Do you notice what thoughts and feelings are taking place inside of you when you watch or read about horrible events on the news? Do you feel alarmed, angered, confused, responsible? What is happening here?

What are the signs of our times? What are they telling us?

Jesus said, **"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near."**

"What is happening here and now?" — This is a sacred question. If you ask it, truly, then buckle up, for it may lead you to places you never imagined.

Ask questions. Tune in with yourself and your surroundings.

Be aware.

Alert

Finally, being alert is a quality that we must sharpen and hone like a blade.

We trust that our first responders have their trucks ready to roll at a moments notice. They have been practicing first aid and fire prevention and other ways to protect the community. They are ready at to heed the call for help and respond to the need.

We can't all be first responders in the sense that we ride in ambulances and administer first aid, but we can be first responders in spirit. We can be there for friends and family and neighbors when they need us. We can always be ready to do good for another. We can always be ready to go to God in prayer and seek guidance. As firefighters practice the many skills they may need to serve in various ways, we too can form good, mindful habits that will serve us well so we can be healthy and prepared to serve others.

I heard a talk by a famous actor who suggested we put our slippers under our bed each night — way, way under our bed — so that in order to retrieve them we are forced to get down on our knees each morning and thus remember to thank God for the gift of life and ask for guidance. Where do you pray and when? Can you imagine cultivating a life that is like a walking prayer, a constant conversation with God?

Just as you might have a checklist for emergency preparedness — having a fire extinguisher in your kitchen and a flashlight in case you lose power — have a checklist or way to remind yourself to pause, to listen, to go into a state of awareness and prayer. No matter how busy and distracted we may be, we can find peace in each moment and thereby make ourselves more alert.

Jesus said, ³²“**But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.** ³⁵**Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.**”

Be Alert.

Conclusion

Wherever you are on your life's journey, if you take a moment to consider it, you probably know some steps you can take to strengthen your body or your mind, or to make your home or community safer and healthier, or to create better habits.

The picture on your bulletin shows a lighthouse. It is a symbol of watchfulness and also protection against the hidden rocks near the shore. Feel free to take it home and cut out the picture and tape it somewhere as a reminder to pause, to breath, to shine a light and be watchful to some issue in your life.

Jesus said, “⁷**What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’**”

Be Awake — don't sleepwalk through your life.

Be Aware — pay attention and ask questions, always seeking truth.

Be Alert — cultivate a sense of readiness, allowing your inner voice to guide you.

And may you be awake, aware and alert to God's ever present spirit in your life, today, tomorrow and always. Amen.