

Title: Awake and More Awake
Date: 3/19/2023 (Lent 4, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [1 Samuel 16:1-13](#); [Ephesians 5:8-14](#); [John 9:1-41](#); [Psalm 23](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/-19XnlwDio?t=1841>

“Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

Amen.

How many of you have had trouble adjusting to Daylight Savings this week?

Mornings have been hard. I stay up an hour later than I normally do because I feel awake, but then I have to wake up at the normal time. Adjusting to a time change of an hour or two is much harder for me than adjusting to a time change for seven or eight hours.

When the difference is *that* big, my body realizes that it has to get with the new program immediately. “Oh my, I need to make some changes right now, or I won’t be able to function at all!” When the difference is small, my body gets a bit wishy-washy. “Do I *really* need to make any changes? The body is a bit slower, and the brain is a little foggy. That’s *probably* good enough to get by.”

The difference between being asleep and awake is a big one.

In a quote attributed to Homer, sleep is called “death’s little brother,” and the Buddha called sleep, “the small death.”¹ When we are asleep, or at least when we are in certain parts of the sleep cycle, there is complete lack of awareness of what’s going on around us. Our brain is still active, but we’re not aware of our surroundings the same way as when we’re awake.

When someone is in deep sleep, we say they are “dead to the world” or “out like a light.” Contrary to appearances, all of our senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch are still functioning. It just takes more for something to break through our consciousness.

Think about all the time-honored ways that parents use to wake up their children for school- bright lights, a super loud noise, a splash of cold water.

Think of the old commercials for Folgers. Someone brews a cup of coffee, and their loved ones wake up with their nose twitching before their eyes are even open.²

The difference between being asleep and awake is a big one. The difference between being awake and being **more** awake is not always that clear.

Let's look at today's gospel. It's a long story, and it's long because

- 1) there are many characters and
- 2) many of those characters are **really** intent on not seeing, not accepting, what is front of their eyes. In order of appearance, we have Jesus, his disciples, the blind man, the neighbors and those who had seen the blind man as a beggar, the Pharisees, the Jews, and the blind man's parents.

At the beginning of the story, Jesus explains to the disciples that this man "was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (Jn 9:3). Instead of rejoicing that the blind man can now see, instead of celebrating God's works being revealed in this world, some people decide to take another approach.

His neighbors and those who had seen the man as a beggar are the first to raise questions about the evidence before their eyes. Some of them are certain that this is the man who used to sit and beg. Others don't think that that was him. To them, his blindness is his defining characteristic. Now that he is no longer blind, he isn't the same person any more.

The word "kept" keeps showing up. He keeps telling them, "I am the man" (Jn 9:9), and they keep asking, "How were your eyes opened?" (Jn 9:10). Imagine denying that.

It's like the discourse on Twitter between women who are priests and people who don't think women should be allowed to lead or preach or teach in church. "I'm a priest." "No, you're not." "I'm a priest." "You can't be a woman and a priest. The Bible says women can't be priests (it doesn't). Who said you could be a priest?"

If we're being generous, we'd say these neighbors want to know because they want to know how God was at work, because they themselves want that kind of transformation. But they bring him to the Pharisees because he received his sight on the Sabbath, so they're probably trying to get someone in trouble.

A blind man can now see! That is AMAZING. Yet it feels more like they're looking for something to criticize, not something to celebrate. Some people with disabilities criticize healing stories because they tend to pass over the desires and experiences of the people being cured, but the people asking these questions aren't concerned with this man's feelings. They question whether this healing is valid or lawful because of it threatens how they think the world should look.

The gospel talks about a man who was blind and can now see. What if we read it as a story about a person who came to see that they are not the gender they were assigned to at birth?

Or a story about a person who awakened to something new about their sexuality?

Or a story about a person who came to see they are more than what they had been taught about what was possible for a person their gender or their race or “people like them”?

The Pharisees question the man who had formerly been blind. Like the neighbors, instead of celebrating this man’s newfound sight, they criticize the source of God’s works. This healing took place on the Sabbath. This isn’t of God because it breaks their understanding of the laws of God. Convinced that Jesus is a sinner, they denied that he could perform such signs. Yet the evidence is standing right in front of their eyes, testifying to his transformation.

God created a world that is richer and more complex than what we can possibly imagine; why not wake up to the possibilities that God is helping us to see? Why would we decide to place limits on God, to reduce God to our understanding, as these Pharisees were doing with Jesus?

The Pharisees kick it up the chain of command. In this case “the Jews” might have referred to the people in charge of the synagogue since they had the authority to summon the man’s parents. They were so intent on disproving what they saw, the personal experience of this formerly blind man, that they insisted on talking to his parents.

Meanwhile, his parents are afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue, afraid of being cut off from the community they’ve known all their life. So, they cut HIM off. They confirm that their son was born blind, but make it very clear that they are NOT responsible for the way things are now. “He is of age, ask him” (Jn 9:21,23). They wash their hands of him.

Once again, the man who received his sight is summoned. Remember, he didn’t ask for this to happen. Jesus just walked up to him and applied mud to his eyes and told him to wash in the pool. He had to be open to receiving it, but he didn’t ask for it. He didn’t choose for God to reveal God’s works through him. And after it happened, he testified to it; he shared his truth.

It was up to the people around him to decide whether or not THEY are open to the evidence in front of them and by extension, the source of the miracle, the truth that Jesus comes from God. A man who was blind could now see; someone was awake and aware in a way they have never been before. This is such a long story because some people refused to see what was right in front of them.

When we’re awake, we might get used to operating on a certain level of awake. It’s not until we encounter something so sharp and piercing that it breaks through our consciousness that we realize we weren’t operating on 100%, that things are not as they should be, not as they *could* be.

Take the latest mass shooting, emphasis on latest. The murder of George Floyd. The 1619 Project. The confederate flag and the cross at the US Capital on Jan. 6.

Unusual weather patterns that are now normal. Events like these force us, for at least a brief moment, to be more aware, more awake.

When those things happen, we have a decision to make. We can decide whether we want to stay at that level. We can say a loud, resounding YES! to seeing more of what's in front of us, to hearing more of what's being said. We can open our hearts and all our senses and allow this new experience, this new piece of information, to work on us and transform us.

Or we can decide to go back to where we were.

- We're not ready to disrupt our routines. I talk a good game about asking for help and not buying into the myth of self-sufficiency but am I there yet?
shrug
- We like the framework we already have for understanding and operating in this world; it works for us. The thought of working on learning the nuances of yet another thing, to be aware of our language around race and sexuality and now gender...

Some of us decide to go as far as making being awake and aware a bad thing. We get rid of books that expand our collective understanding of our world and our history and our fellow human beings. We allow corporations to practice their values until they have values that aren't ours.³ We open anti-woke comedy clubs in Austin.⁴ We may not be doing those things, but if we don't say anything, that's saying something.

The difference between being awake and being more awake is not always that clear. Sometimes the benefits are even less clear, at least when we're just looking at our lives and not the environment we're creating for trans youth or Black men pulled over for traffic stops.

When we are no longer blind to what we could not see before, we can celebrate. Or we can say, "That's not the light of the world; that's not from God."

To be clear, critical thinking is not a bad thing; Jesus encourages us to look beyond the letter of the law! And as long as we are asking questions, let us ask questions like: How are God's works being revealed in what we see? How is this a sign of God's love? How is this a sign of God's grace? How is this calling us to see more clearly, to love more deeply, and walk more fully in the light of Christ?

¹ <https://medium.com/@adithyanrowi/believing-sleep-is-a-small-death-is-good-for-you-cae6299d4ef9>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7LXSQ85jpw>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/03/01/biden-veto-climate-investing-bill/>

⁴ <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/900-per-ticket-no-canceling-joe-rogans-comedy-mothership-shows>