

December 1, 2024

Luke 21:25-36

“The Blessing of Seeing Jesus”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Emma Cooksey is now 46 years old and living in Florida. She's a writer and podcast host devoted to helping people with chronic sleep issues. When she was 30 years old, she experienced one of the scariest things that can happen while driving: falling asleep at the wheel. She says: "Up to that point, I had been tired when driving, but had never fallen asleep before, and I definitely hadn't done that with my baby in the car. I narrowly avoided a collision and I had the feeling that I could've just died." I can only imagine how traumatic that must have been for her, especially with a baby.

Our gospel lesson for this morning reminds us to be careful that we do not "fall asleep at the wheel," so to speak. Jesus warns of his sudden coming. Do not let him find you sleeping. Jesus pointedly says to you and me: "... watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But *stay awake* at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

"Stay awake at all times," Jesus says. That verb - *stay awake* - means to be vigilant. It conveys the idea of being alert, and is a word that can be used for both physical and spiritual sleep. The word that is used in the text is the same cognate that is found in the time when the disciples were in the garden of Gethsemane on the night when Jesus was betrayed. They were not only asked to physically stay awake, but were to be alert against temptation.

Remember? Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him ... Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

The physical sleeping of the disciples was a prelude to something much worse. Their inability to stay awake, under the circumstances, was a warning of spiritual disaster. And the spiritual disaster hit when the shepherd was struck. The sheep naturally scattered. Their heavy eyelids and sleeping was a symptom of a greater danger within their souls. They saw the sorrow of Jesus to the point of death, but were dismissing it and opening themselves up to their own distress when great distress would fall on their Lord and Savior. Their inability to overcome their flesh was, in fact, a deep spiritual problem.

Jesus especially warned Peter to pray so that he would not fall into temptation. Remember Peter? He is the one who said that he would stay with the Lord no matter what, and he is the one who denied the

Lord three times. Well, the betrayer comes and they arrest Jesus and Saint Mark records these sad, sad words, “Then everyone deserted him and fled [14:50].” We pray that we may not desert our Lord in these last days and flee before his glorious coming when all will be too late for restoration.

That word that Jesus uses - *stay awake* - urges believers to be attentive to their faith and the coming of the Lord. The last thing we want is to be spiritually rubbing the sand out of our eyes when Jesus returns at the sound of the last trumpet. Our gospel lesson for this morning makes it clear: “Stay awake at all times,” that is, do not let him find you without faith. My mind travels to the words recorded in the book of Revelation: “Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed (16:15).” To be naked means to remove our baptismal clothing. To be shamefully exposed is like eating from the forbidden tree and running from God when he is walking in the garden of our lives.

Jesus is warning us to not be asleep at the wheel of our relationship with him. He is rebuking those who are living with an evil conscience. He is warning about unrepentance and a loss of faith. “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Do not allow the flesh to have dominion. To do so is to find oneself on the highway to hell. Thus, the strong words of our gospel lesson are a call to be on guard, or repent if we have already let our guard down. We are bid to either see the error of our ways and turn from them, or take the warning to heart and be especially careful not to violate our conscience and do evil to the loss of our faith. So, our text is very powerful law to the one who is asleep at the wheel, and a very strong exhortation to the one who is currently awake and paying attention.

The danger is that we have the flesh and it can trip us up as it tries to convince us that evil is good and good is evil. Once again, the words of Jesus in our lesson: “But *stay awake* at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” All of this begs the question: “How do we stay awake?”

Well, we might start by simply thinking about what it means to *stay awake*. When you are awake your eyes are supposed to be open. If our eyes are open then we are looking at something are we not? So, what are we to be looking at? When the disciples were in the garden and Jesus asked them to watch and pray with him he gave them the subject matter of their watching and praying? He said: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” Those were words that should have caused the disciples to ask: “Why is our Lord’s soul overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death?” And, with that, we know what the disciples were supposed to be watching and what we should be watching. Their eyes were supposed to be fixed on the sufferings and death of Jesus for them, and that’s where our eyes are to be fixed too. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was suffering for all sins and headed for the death that would give forgiveness, life, and salvation.

What we are to be watching is the gospel and sacraments, for the gospel and sacraments are Christ and the forgiveness of our sin. The context is always the loss of ourselves in the face of everything that Jesus brings. We are supposed to be wide awake in the undeserved kindness of Jesus who clothes us with his garment of righteousness - cleansing us of all sins in baptism - so that desire for the forbidden tree is

overcome by desire for the tree of life who is Jesus. To keep our eyes open is to receive into our eyesight the means of grace - Jesus by faith - and to move our attention from that which is evil to that which is good and wonderful. To pray is to move from evil desires to the thoughts of God who is our true help when tempted to spiritually sleep.

If we see him now by faith in the means of grace, then we will be ready to see him when he comes in a cloud with power and great glory. If we see his undeserved kindness in the forgiveness of sins, we can even be ready for all that is coming on the world. When the things prophesied by Christ are taking place, insofar as our eyes of faith are on Jesus already in the means of grace, we will be able to straighten up and raise our heads to see the redemption that is drawing near. And when our Redeemer comes ... the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount will come true: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God!" Imagine! **The Blessing of Seeing Jesus!**

It is Jesus and his gift of the forgiveness of sins and the hope of seeing him that drives away spiritual sleep and keeps us awake. It is the gospel of life that mortifies our old sinful selves so that we may remain awake and ready for the moment when he comes to pick us up and take us away from this unholy mess. The bottom line is that our everything is found only in the incredible love of Jesus Christ and all that he gives in his sufferings and death. Oh how we wait for the consummation of all that he has done for us when we will see the beauty of his face! For this we stay awake! As Paul writes: "... God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:4-9)!"

To see Jesus will surpass all the joys on earth! To gaze upon the face of Jesus, to live with Jesus, to hear the voice of Jesus, to know as we are fully known, will far exceed anything that we can possibly desire. He is the spouse of our soul. He is all in all. And we will be satisfied. When our everything is genuinely found in Jesus, we have eyes of faith to see now and avoid falling asleep. And, one day, with our resurrected eyes, we will have **The Blessing of Seeing Jesus** in his glory without end! May our hearts yearn within us!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott