

Wake Up

Mark 1:1-8

Is everyone wide-awake? I guess you would say that is every preacher's hope and goal, not to put people to sleep when they are preaching. I read about his one pastor who had one of his parishoners whose name was Jake who every Sunday would fall asleep half way through the sermon, sometimes to the point of snoring. The Preacher decided to have some fun with Jake, so the following Sunday, he began his sermon as usual. Soon he noticed Jake was drifting off to sleep, so he began to talk softly. "Now friends", he said to the congregation, "I'm sure that each one of you here is a devoted Christian, and wants to go to heaven", and the congregation all nodded agreement. The Preacher continued softly "Well, if there's anyone here that doesn't want to go to heaven, and wants to go to that other place, then..." and the preacher took a deep breath and shouted "STAND UP!" Well, Jake is startled awake with the shouting and instantly jumps to his feet! The pastor looks over his pulpit at Jake and asks him: "Jake, are you really sure you want to be standing up?" Jake looks around and replies, "Well, Preacher, I see you're the only other person standing, but if you're for it, I'm ready to join you." ... I promise if I see someone nodding off, I won't try that approach.

We are in the season of Advent and as we learned last week, it's a lot about waiting and watching, and staying awake spiritually. The word Advent means "coming" as we await the coming of the birth of Jesus, or as we await the second coming, Jesus return at the end of the age. It's all about getting ready, being watchful, or staying awake. Some of the words we hear in this season are: preparation, readiness, watchfulness. From the reading last week we hear Jesus words: "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!"

I guess you could say, it's about God getting our attention so that might hear and understand his message for us. We hear the cry of the prophet John the Baptist as he echoes the prophet Isaiah: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." This is the voice crying in the wilderness...get ready, get

Wake Up

prepared, the Messiah is coming. This One who is mightier than I. It's a basic, but important question for us this morning as we approach Christmas. How are you getting ready? What kind of spiritual preparations are you making? I think a lot of us at the beginning of the Christmas season feel like we're on the starting line, with the starter calling out: "On your mark, get set, go." And the frantic race begins. All the things we have to do. Everything that has to get done before Christmas...the people to shop for, the parties to go to, the baking, sending cards, taking care of our list of hundreds of things to do. We're trying to get ready and we can get very stressed out.

But what about our spiritual preparation and readiness. John the Baptist certainly had a message of preparation. And it was a message that centered around a word we don't use a lot today. That word is "Repent". Listen to his cry: "Repent for the kingdom of God has come near." The idea of repentance was not popular among all of his hearers. There were those who had a hard time with his words. They had to wonder who was this guy with camel hair clothes who ate locusts and wild honey. And telling us we are a brood of vipers, warning us of the wrath to come. Who does he think he is, anyway? But his message is persistent. "Prepare the way of the Lord, get ready for his coming."

Of course, there were who were eagerly awaiting this message of a coming Messiah. They had been looking for years...they opened their hearts to John's message. It was a message of repentance and they were ready to experience God's forgiveness and be baptized.

This season of Advent also calls you and me to get ready, to wake up to the call of the Gospel. That we might celebrate the season with a heart ready to hear from the Lord, open to make the needed changes that will bring us closer to the Lord. Maybe for some of you this morning, you're saying to yourself: "I'm not sure I can muster up enough Christmas spirit and sentiment. Because you're feeling like you're on that Christmas merry-go-round. There's all the commercialism of the season, the crowded highways and stores, January bills, the hectic pace. I wonder if the cry of John the Baptist is speaking to you. Because the words are

Wake Up

calling you to look beyond all the stuff that surrounds Christmas and focus on the One born in Bethlehem...John's call is to get ready and put your focus on Jesus.

Have you noticed how John the Baptist talks about clearing the road, making the highway straight. It was a reference to what they did for the king in ancient times as he travelled through the countryside. Rocks and boulders had to be removed, trees cut down, ground had to be leveled in order to make a straight path. A lot of road work had to be done. I sort of think of John the Baptist's message as a call to doing some road work in our lives. Maybe you would call it road work repentance. We've all travelled down the interstate or other highways and encountered road work construction. And our usual reaction is why do they have to be doing this now. It's really messing up my trip. It's so inconvenient. Yet when you think about it, we know that road work is necessary for improvement. The same is true for you in me...spiritually it's road work repentance. As we prepare the highway in our hearts. We have to take a close look at the potholes, the bumps and cracks that need repair. They are the sinful attitudes and actions, the rebellion within us that need God's repair. A spirit of pride or prejudice, an act of disobedience, a spirit of resentment or an unforgiving attitude, a lustful heart, lies we tell, words of gossip or retaliation. Each one of us has to examine our hearts, and see the road work that needs to be done in order to prepare for the coming of Christ.

And the good news of the Christmas message is that Christ was born, and that He came to provide the way of salvation and that the way of forgiveness has been offered to us. This is the powerful message we will soon celebrate. The coming Messiah, this Jesus born in Bethlehem, this One who came to do the road work, the road work in our hearts. This was his ultimate purpose: To seek and save that which was lost. To open the door for forgiveness, to reconcile us to God. And so we hear the same cry from our Lord: "The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news."

When you think about it, one of the most powerful things about the Christmas narrative is the message of the incarnation. That the very Son of God became one of us. We all have the tendency to romanticize the Christmas story, with warm

Wake Up

and clean straw, and nice smelling animals, and no baby crying. But the truth is that in the real world, caves are cool and damp, and animals smell, and babies do cry. And it reminds me that the Son of God was born as a human being into a real world of sin and darkness. Jesus became like us in order to identify with you and me. The one who knew the glory of heaven, would enter the depths of the human experience to take care of the worst of the human condition. This one born in Bethlehem who would take the journey to the cross and make it possible for us to find forgiveness and salvation.

All of us are being asked to consider our own journey in this season. And we have to ask ourselves: “How can I prepare room for Jesus.” “What changes do I need to make to have a heart of spiritual readiness?” “Where do I need to be challenged from my sleepiness and wake up to the call of God to follow in his ways.” Where have I been complacent about my spiritual life? What are the steps I can take in this season to prepare my heart? Will I take the time to focus on the reason for the season and not allow the world’s way of celebrating become a distraction? I guess you could say it is challenge to do some road work repentance. Some of the changes may take time and come slowly, others can be done immediately. But I want to do some serious road work in my heart, to make straight the highway for the Lord. I want to be ready to follow where his Spirit leads me. And what we discover is that our spiritual readiness will lead me to a more joyous and authentic celebration of the season. I invite you in this Advent season to take the road to Bethlehem. It may require some real road work to get there. But God’s light will guide your way. And his grace will lead us to find real peace in our hearts. The words from one of our hymns says it well: “Awake, O sleeper, rise from death, and Christ shall give you light; so learn his love, its length and breadth, its fullness, depth, and height.” In this season of Advent, let’s prepare him room in our hearts. May each of us get ready and wake up to his call.