

**Zion's UCC of Taborton  
December 3, 2017  
Rev. Konrad Raup**

**Staying Awake  
Isaiah 65: 1-2, Psalm 81: 11-16, Mark 13: 24-37**

As I mentioned earlier, today is the First Sunday in Advent, and the first Sunday of the new church year. Advent is the season of anticipation. Everyone seems to be waiting for something. Whether it's Santa, or the arrival of friends and family from far away, or a special party, shopping, decorating, or making special foods, we live in anticipation during Advent. Some of us are even anticipating the birth of the Prince of Peace.

The scripture readings for Advent are just as complicated. For the first two weeks, they are anticipating the return of Jesus-What we often call the second coming. Then in the last two weeks they zero in on the birth of Jesus, when God became human in order to show us how to live as God would have us live.

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All that anticipation can become hectic and will frazzle us if we let it. We try to multitask and that leads to a lack of focus. Recently I was driving out near the airport. I was on my way to get a haircut, and I had all sorts of lists in my head about church, Thanksgiving, family, Advent, Christmas... my list of lists goes on and on. As I drove, I happened to glance up at a sign and I thought it read:"pork, ride and fly". I immediately wondered why a garage for the airport would also sell pork. It wasn't until I was sitting at a traffic light further down the road that I finally realized that the word wasn't pork, it was Park. Park, ride and fly. There was nothing odd about the sign, I was the one with the problem. The past and future were taking up so much of my time that the present was only half being attended to.

I'd bet that has happened to you too. You're thinking about six things all at once and you mishear something on the tv or radio, or, worse yet, it's something someone says to you. They say one thing and you hear another. That can get us into all sorts of trouble can't it? Distracted driving is a major cause of accidents, We've even had to pass laws to stop people from multitasking while they walk down the street. I'll bet that some of us are physically sitting here right now, but our minds are someplace else, anticipating, worrying, planning. We won't see the reign of God breaking into our world if we are in that state. We must become alert, live in the present and focus our minds

There is a wonderful scene in Monty Python's movie, The Life of Brian, in which Jesus is preaching the beatitudes. He says, "blessed are the peacemakers", but there are People in the far back of the crowd who aren't paying full attention. Someone asks: what did he say? And someone else replies: "I think he said blessed are the cheesemakers". That of course, leads to an argument about why Jesus singled out that group and not the candle makers, or the

carpenters or whatever. It humorously catches our half awake way of living in this world. And the unnecessary pain it can cause.

Richard Rohr, who is the head of the Center for Action and Contemplation, says that when we put our brains on autopilot, we immediately start to filter all of our experiences through who we are, rather than what is real. We see what we expect to see and hear what we expect to hear.

But, how do we get beyond that? How do we make past recede, make the future not so frightening, and allow the present to become our focus? Rohr says that the practice of a Spiritual discipline helps. Not surprisingly, I agree. You need to work at making your mind receptive and your heart soft and open.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist, teaches this mindfulness, this focus, through ritual and ceremony. He uses the simple act of drinking tea as one example. He says that we must be completely awake to enjoy our tea. Only then can we feel the warmth of the cup, smell the aroma, taste the sweetness, appreciate the delicate flavor.

If our minds are reliving the past or worrying about the future we may look down and discover an empty cup and be unsure how it happened. In our frenetic thinking we miss the present experience. It's true of drinking tea and of life in general. When we stop going over what has already passed and stop worrying about what may or may not happen, then we can live in the present moment.

I am reminded of all the people I know who are so busy taking pictures or video of events that they miss them. They live their lives only in retrospect.

When people ask me what I believe, I tell them: I believe in a Marcan Jesus and an in-breaking, partially-realized, Johannine eschatology. Got that? I'll be quizzing you at coffee hour. All it really means is that I like Mark's portrait of a very human Jesus, and John's vision of the reign of God as a current and ongoing event that is open to all of us, not some future end of the world thing. It's like the story I told the kids about the fish looking for the ocean. We don't need to search for God, because God is all around us. We just have to open our eyes and see God.

All the major religious systems have similar views. Much of the teaching of the Buddha was about awakening our senses to the divine in the here and now. In our Old Testament reading today from the prophet Isaiah, God laments that the divine was all around them, but people would not see it or hear it. And that view is echoed by the psalmist in that part of Psalm 81 that we heard.

In our Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus reminds us of our need for remaining awake to what is happening, or we may miss it. God invites us to that new heaven and new earth that are to be our inheritance. Will we be so caught up in our own affairs that we suddenly look up from our iPad and wonder where everybody went? Will we look down at an empty tea cup and not know how it got that way.

My wife, who many of you have met over the last month, leads a group of people at Journey UCC, who meet once a month to develop this kind of spiritual focus. They begin and end in silence. In between they spend time being fully present to one another. She calls it her “deep listening group”. From today’s Gospel warning, she could also call it her “staying awake group”.

If there are some here at Zion’s who are interested in trying to become more spiritually awake and grounded in the present, we might prevail upon her to begin a similar group here as well. She’ll be here next week and can more fully explain how it works. Think about it.

I am sure that you remember the story of Martha and Mary. Martha was the doer. She was the one who cooked and set the table and hustled and bustled when Jesus came to dinner. Mary, on the other hand, sat with Jesus and listened. Then when Martha complained, what did Jesus say? He said that Mary had chosen the better part. Martha would remember the cooking and cleaning, but might miss the presence of the divine in her home. Mary was focused on the divine. Mary was becoming fully alive. She was alert to the in breaking reign of God.

Good works are wonderful. Good works are a part of living like Jesus, but more is needed or we will miss the reign of God in our lives. What is required is to be awake, stay alert, and live in the present.