

Sermon for 1 Advent, Year B
The Rev. Craig A. Phillips, Ph.D., Rector
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Arlington, VA
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“Keep Awake”

Under the boughs of the boddhi tree, Sidhartha Gautama sat motionless, meditating. At once the solution to the problem that had brought him to sit under that tree came to him. He opened his eyes. He was enlightened. He was awake. That is the story of the *Buddha*, the name that literally means “one who is awake.”

The Awake One, the Buddha, had set for himself the goal of solving the problem of human suffering. Shortly after his “enlightenment,” he announced to the world that human suffering is caused by clinging—that is, holding onto or trying to possess persons or things. If we want to put an end to that suffering, he said, we must extinguish all desire.

That is only the beginning of what I could say about the Buddha. [As you probably know, I have frequently taught college courses on a variety of the world's religions. Perhaps some other time, I can say more about this.] My point in telling this story is to contrast elements of the story of the Buddha with our Gospel reading this morning. The Buddha is *awake*. Jesus urges us to be *awake*. St. Paul similarly urges the disciples of Jesus to be awake and perennially ready for the return of the Lord.

According to the Scriptures we have read during the last weeks of Pentecost and this first Sunday of Advent, we are called to live our lives in constant readiness and preparedness. Our Gospel reading ends as it has for three of the last five weeks with the admonition that we remain *awake* because we cannot know the hour of the Lord's return. Similarly, in our epistle this morning Paul urges his friends, in so many words, to live lives that are blameless—lives that if the Lord were to return at this moment would be beyond reproach. The point of these Scripture readings is that we should never do anything for which we would not be prepared to give an account or to have to explain if the Lord were to return at that moment.

If you are a teenager whom your parents trust enough to leave at home without a babysitter, then you know what I am talking about. If you have

ever been a teenager, you know what I am talking about. You never know when your parents might walk in the door. You can take a chance, but if you are surprised then you will have to explain, even account for, your actions. If you have ever been caught, you know what I mean. There is some explaining to do and perhaps a few consequences from your decisions that perhaps you had not fully contemplated.

“Being awake” to the world around us is central to the life of faith. The figurative use of the idea of being *awake* is found in both Buddhism and Christianity—and no doubt in many of the world’s religious traditions. To be awake is to be alive.

Jesus often reminded those who heard him that they had ears, but could not hear, and eyes, but they could not see. No doubt Jesus might also have said that although many of his hearers were physically awake, they nonetheless were spiritually asleep. To be faithful to God we must strive to wake from sleep and be alive and awake to God.

What does it mean for you to be awake? Let’s think about that together. What is it like to be physically awake but spiritually asleep? I don’t think that we have to imagine *that*. Most of us know it only too well. We know how easy it is to live our lives in a kind of stupor, just going through the motions. We know how easy it is to be bored with so many interesting persons, places, and things all around us. We know how easy it is to be so tired that we can hardly care about anything or anyone else. We know how easy it is to get stuck and for our lives and relationships to stagnate. And perhaps you know, from your own experience or from the experience of those you love, how easy it is to become addicted to such things as caffeine, alcohol, or food. The well-known psychologist Rollo May argues in his book *Addiction and Grace* that to be human is in some way to be addicted. For some people the states of exhaustion, depression, and addiction that I have described are medical issues that can be helped by a variety of medications, therapies, or other remedies.

In spite of all that, however, we cannot blame our spiritual ennui solely on our brain or body chemistry. Many of us often realize that we are spiritually dead and know of no way to remedy it.

As the Advent season begins and Christmas looms, we are assaulted by the promises of advertising that the key to personal happiness is to be found in

the car we drive, the deodorant we use, or the diamond jewelry we give or receive. We may enjoy the use of our possessions but sooner or later we come to realize that they alone cannot supply meaning or purpose to our lives.

It is far easier, in fact, to describe what it is like to be spiritually asleep or dead than it is to describe what it means to be alive. So what does it mean to be awake and to be alive?

First and foremost to be spiritually awake or alive is to have a vital and life-giving relationship with God. When you pray do you nurture a real relationship that involves silence and listening, or do you fill your time with “fix it” lists for God? True prayer is not one-sided but involves building a relationship with God. [If you have questions about that, you have already taken the first step. You might want to consider finding and talking about this with a “spiritual director.”] To be truly awake we cannot place our ultimate trust in our possessions or in any thing—but only in the living God. Here both the Buddha and Jesus come to a somewhat similar diagnosis—even if their solutions are somewhat incompatible. The Buddha tells us that clinging to things or to people is the cause of human suffering and that we need to let go if we are to find peace within. Jesus tells us not to place our trust in treasures that can rust or spoil, but to place our trust in the living God.

To be awake and alive is to be engaged in what you do. If stagnation is a sign of spiritual sleep, then growth is a sign of being alive. To grow you will have to open yourself to an uncertain future, and trust that if you remain attentive to relationships to one another and to God that good will ultimately come of it.

Advent is a time of repentance—a time of turning back for the ways and patterns of our lives that keep us from being truly awake before God. To be truly awake we have to let go of the things that try to substitute themselves for God and go in search of the living God—the God who gives us life and hope.

Amen.