

## Stay Woke

Luke 12.32-40

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*Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased your Abba to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give the money to poorer people. Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out – treasures that won't fail you, [treasures] in heaven that thieves can't steal and moths can't destroy. For wherever your treasure is, that's where your heart will be. Be dressed and ready, and keep your lamps lit. Be like the household staff awaiting the owner's return from a wedding, so that when the owner arrives and knocks, you'll open the door without delay. It will go well with those staff members whom the owner finds wide awake upon returning. I tell you the absolute truth, the owner will put on an apron, seat them at table and proceed to wait on them. Should the owner happen to come at midnight, or before sunrise, and find them prepared, it will go well with them. Understand this : no homeowner who knew when a thief was coming would have let the thief break in ! So be on guard – the Promised One will come when least expected.*  
(the Inclusive Bible]

Keep your lamps lit and burning.

You may have noticed that there are a lot of instructions in these few verses in Luke.

“Keep your lamps lit ... be dressed and ready.” I think about that sometimes when I'm in the shower and I find myself wondering when that big earthquake will hit. And I send up a little prayer: “Please, not now!” I want to be dressed and ready when that moment comes. Which means that I have a fair amount of fear about not being ready when it does.

I suspect we all have some anxiety about being prepared.

So it's all the more interesting that these verses begin with another instruction: “Fear not.” Be not afraid because “it has pleased your Abba to give you the kingdom.” That's not a typo. It's the way the Inclusive Bible refers to that reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. It's that community that treats one another as “kin” rather than slaves or enemies or “the other.” Don't be afraid because that “kingdom” is already yours. What you have been preaching about and praying for is already here.

So the next instruction is: “Sell what you have.” If the reign of God is already here, your security, as Pastor Anita described so eloquently last week, isn't based on the things you own. It's not about having that illusive “American Girl” doll that will guarantee that you are enough; that you are worthy; that you belong.

And, because of that, whatever you do have should be invested in that which will out-live you: “Treasures that will not fail you; treasures in heaven” that will not be stolen or destroyed. But, even with all that, Jesus instructs the disciples to “be on their guard because no homeowner knows when a thief is coming,” which, ironically, is just like the coming of the “Promised One.”

So:

Be prepared.

Don't be afraid.

The “kingdom” is already yours. So sell everything. And invest what you have in the treasure – the legacy – that will out-live you. But be on your guard because a thief (a.k.a the Promised One) could show up at any moment.

Exactly how all these instructions fit together has been nagging me all week.

It seems like the overarching instruction is “be wide awake,” or “stay woke” as they say these days.

I discovered that the Essence webpage puts out an annual list of 100 powerful “woke women” - African American women who, according to Merriam-Webster are “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).”

I noticed that on that list is Congresswoman Barbara Lee from California and I am honored to say that she serves on the board of the American Baptist Seminary of the West with me. She is a good reason to never miss a board meeting. When the Honorable Barbara Lee is in the house, you stay awake.

While I was looking, I also found a program from NPR's Weekend Edition with Sam Sanders, an African American contributor who said: “It's Time To Put ‘Woke’ To Sleep.”

Wait. What? What about my cool sermon title?

Sanders admits that “woke” had a resurgence with the Black Lives Matter movement and became a shorthand for a “mindset and a worldview that values black lives.” Of course, I say “Amen!” to that.

But he goes on to trace the history of “woke” to a 1962 essay by William Melvin Kelley in the New York Times – although its use may go back as far as the 1940s. Kelley says that “once black words, like ‘cats’ or ‘dig it’ used to define certain aspects of blackness, became adopted by a white mainstream, they were officially done.”

A linguist at Pomona College says that, thanks to the internet, a word like “woke” gets grabbed by 20-year olds and then gets passed along and “before you know it, a buzzword ends up in a corporate board meeting; by then ... the word is done.”

Removed from its community, the word loses its punch – its power – and gets tamed into a kind of trademark.

Sanders also quotes news and culture editor, Elijah Watson, and says:

... he no longer uses the word woke. He compares the co-opting of woke to the way music steeped in black tradition moves through mainstream culture. "We made jazz, we made rap, we made all these different things ... It's sad to say but we're used to being taken advantage of and to have things stolen from us."

Now that's interesting. The text for today about being awake ends with the instruction to "be on your guard" because a thief could break in and steal. And this article about being "woke" ends with "we're used to being taken advantage of and to have things stolen from us."

So I would like to revise the sermon title for this morning to: "Wide Awake." I do so because I don't want to be a thief. I recognize that sometimes my privilege makes me think I own things that don't belong to me. And recognizing that is one of the things I need in order to stay awake. How have I co-opted things in ways that serve my own interests instead of the interests of those who created them and hold them and live by them? How has my use of other people's stories and unique traditions moved beyond simply appreciating them and honoring them and respecting them to stealing them?

I think about this when it comes to Native American spirituality. There are such beautiful prayers and powerful teachings about the connection between the earth and the spirit. Even as I learn from them I have to be awake to the fact that those prayers and those teachings come from an ancient history that does not belong to me; from experiences that give them a meaning I do not have access to; from a community that continues to be disregarded and disrespected by people who look like me.

There is a difference between the sharing of equal partners and the presumed possession of all things by the dominant culture.

I have to be wide awake. I have to be on guard to not continue this cycle of stealing what does not belong to me.

So maybe this instruction about being awake has to do with what we think we possess.

Now here I think we really need to stay wide awake. I agree with Presbyterian pastor Hardy Kim that

Jesus' hearers live in the real world [where money, food, or shelter really matter] ... But they are to feel and desire and to frame their whole existence as if they belong somewhere else.

In other words, the instruction "sell what you have and give the money to those who are poorer" is about re-framing the idea that anything belongs to us and to ask the larger question of what it is that we think we belong to.

Life isn't about what we think belongs to us but what we belong to. That thing you have been preaching about and praying for – that "kingdom" of God is already yours and you belong to it.

So be not afraid. You don't need to prove that you are enough. You are worthy. You belong to the very thing you have been looking for.

And what does that "kingdom" look like?

And here Jesus inserts this little parable about a homeowner who goes off to a wedding and could come back at any moment.

This is the part of the passage I like the most:

Be dressed and ready, and keep your lamps lit. Be like the household staff awaiting the owner's return from a wedding, so that when the owner arrives and knocks, you'll open the door without delay. It will go well with those staff members whom the owner finds wide awake upon returning. I tell you the absolute truth, the owner will put on an apron, seat them at table and proceed to wait on them.

What?

I thought this story was supposed to go like this: Be dressed and ready, keep your lamps lit, because the homeowner could come home at any minute and, if you are not awake, be afraid, be very afraid, because the owner is likely to come back and beat the living daylights out of you.

Maybe that's what the disciples expected to hear. Maybe that's what their world had taught them to expect. Be awake because you are afraid.

But what is this new world of relationships where a homeowner comes back and can't wait to put on his (and in this case I mean "his") apron to serve his household staff?

What if the "kingdom" of God is not about fear? What if it's not about staying awake so you can protect yourself and your stuff?

What if the reign of God is like waking up tomorrow morning and wondering who it is that I get to serve today or who is it that will surprise me with some blessing I would never expect?

What if the icon for home in the reign of God is not a whip but an apron?

I love it when Dr. Hunter leads us in prayer on a Sunday morning and begins with: "Thank you, God, for waking us up this morning." It's more than just thanking God that we didn't die in our sleep. It's about more than a time of day. It's about waking up – about being wide awake to a new day of possibilities and challenges and opportunities to serve and to those surprising moments when someone you would never expect offers you the very thing you need.

So, "Thank you, God, for waking us up this morning."

And now it's time to get up; to put on your apron; and to bless the world with that blessing you already are.

And today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

"100 Woke Women" at [www.essence.com/woke-100-women-2018](http://www.essence.com/woke-100-women-2018). Sam Sanders, "It's Time To Put 'Woke' To Sleep," at [www.npr.org/201812/30/680899262/opinion-its-time-to-put-woke-to-sleep](http://www.npr.org/201812/30/680899262/opinion-its-time-to-put-woke-to-sleep). Hardy Kim's reflections on Luke 12.32-40 in Christian Century, July 31, 2019, p.18.



