

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

All Saints Sunday

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Text: Acts 20:17-20

Title: "Outside My Own Little World: I Try to Stay Awake."

Dave Maillette was a parishioner. I may have told you this story before, I know, but it fits with this morning's message. Dave has a great sense of humor and loves to tease. I noticed when he came to worship that when it came time for the sermon, he'd nod off to sleep every week. So, one Sunday in the middle of the message I said his name...loudly, and Dave was startled awake. Laughter in the sanctuary. The next week Dave was in worship as usual but when it came time for the message, he put on sun glasses. From that week on, he called them his sermon glasses.

It turned out that he worked third shift and he'd come straight from work to worship where he would slip off into a comfortable sleep while the preacher preached. After that I thought of sleeping during a sermon as my ministry to the weary.

When we're weary we fall asleep. It's the way we're wired as human beings. But there's another kind of sleep that can come upon us when we're awake. It's the weariness that comes with a lack of awareness. It's the sleepiness that can come when living our lives becomes rote routine, when our preoccupations are so predominant that our heads and hearts have lost touch with the Holy in our presence. Or maybe it's a decision to turn off what's happening in the world because it's so painful to hear. We can choose to be unaware and that, too, is a kind of sleepiness. The risk is that we become numb to the power and possibilities of God's presence and the hope of new life especially in the seasons of pain. Is there an answer for those moments in life when all we want to do is sleep?

We have an episode in the book of Acts from the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul that mentions a sleeper named Eutychus. Now Paul is on his way to Jerusalem when he stops in Traos, a city located on the edge of the Aegean Sea in modern Turkey. He's there for a few days and as Paul is wont to do, he spends time with believers "on the first day of the week." He is here to "break bread" and he is here to teach and preach. It's evening. Lamps are lit, probably many. The room is warm. And as Paul is in the midst of speaking, someone in the back begins to nod off.

I confess that when I read this story, I chuckled thinking that even Paul had people sleeping in church, and then, of course, Jesus had disciples sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane as he went off to pray by himself the night before he was to be crucified. As the Gospel According to Matthew has it:

[Jesus]... said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:40-41)

Apparently, sleeping in the presence of the Holy happens to the best of us.

So Paul is teaching and preaching when a man name Eutychus succumbs to the heat and the late night, on-going preaching of Paul. And although his name means “Lucky”, he isn’t so much as he sits on a window sill, making those slight jerking motions people make when falling asleep while sitting up. I see it all the time from the pulpit. You know the slow dipping of the head followed by slight popping up as you try to stay awake. Eutychus is exercising his neck in this way when he just can’t fight off the sleep. Maybe Paul notices and calls his name in the middle of his message and he pops his head up alarmed and can’t maintain his balance. I don’t know how it happened, but in any case he loses his balance on the window sill and falls out the window, landing on the street below.

Some members of the congregation rush down the stairs to tend to the “lucky one”, pick him up and pronounce him dead, but Paul makes his way to the young man and says—and I’m paraphrasing, “No worries, friends! He’s still alive. His life is in him.” Bends over and picks him up. And then Paul, as if nothing of significance has happened, goes back upstairs, breaks bread with the group, eats and then goes on with the conversation he’s having with the people in the room throughout the rest of the night. Paul pulls an all-nighter with those willing to listen.

The miracle of life-giving happens as he is sharing the good news of Jesus’ resurrected presence. Paul’s mission and ministry is about convincing listeners that God has the power to give life when death seems to win and God has done this supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It might appear that death has the last word, that evil wins the day, but Christ comes with a message of hope that Paul preached in his first letter to the congregation at Corinth, Greece:

...this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55 “Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

And while God may have used Paul to renew life in Eutychus, the “lucky one”, it was only a temporary resuscitation. The more enduring life comes with the sharing of the Word to which Paul immediately returned without fanfare because the Word of God’s power over death moves from generation to generation. The Word is eternal, while resuscitation is not. Though we see evidence to the contrary, the Word of God’s victory over death continues to seek to convince us that eternal life comes with knowing and trusting the One who has come and continues to come in Jesus Christ. All we need to do is stay awake to the promise and trust the One making it.

In the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus teaches his disciples about the coming of the Son of Man. He teaches:

32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert;[f] for you do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.35 Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mark 13)

Keep alert for the presence of the Holy One. On Saturday, October 18th, there were five people from this congregation that attended an all-day emphasis on reaching out. It was called the REACH Summit. The keynote speaker was from the well-known Church of the Resurrection, one of the leading UM congregations in the country. Adam Hamilton is the pastor who started the church with 4 people in a funeral home parlor in Leawood, Kansas. It has now grown to a membership of 20,000 with 4 different locations. Debi Nixon is one of the key staff members of that church, and she shared the story of the congregation wanting to reach more people with the love of God in Jesus Christ, so they began to add campuses. One of those campuses is in downtown Kansas City, a place in which people had lost hope. The church bought a storefront building, surrounded, she said by a couple of rough neck bars and to the back of the building they also had neighbors: a strip club. They took the bold move of establishing a congregation in such a place. Of course, the owners of those businesses were wondering how their new neighbor would behave. A church in a seedy part of the city. So the church decided to offer the love of Christ without judgment, and they did that by buying poinsettia plants during the first Advent season they worshipped there. They delivered those plants to their backdoor neighbors: one plant for every woman working in the strip club.

Can you imagine what would have happened if instead of flowers, picket signs were used against their neighbors? Instead, a new congregation was begun in a place in which it seemed there was little hope. If I remember correctly, the new church in that neighborhood is worshipping about 900 people a week.

Stay awake and be alert for the presence of the Holy One , because God is still proclaiming that life is still in those we think might be without hope. Maybe you and I aren't being called so much to stay awake IN church but rather to stay awake AS the church because as one of my favorite hymns sings:

Christ is alive and goes before us to show and share what love can do.  
This is a day of new beginnings. Our God is making all things new.

Outside our own little world, our God is making all things new. Please turn in your hymnals to #383 and sing it with me.