

Sermon for Dec. 3, 2017 (Advent1B) "Awakenings"

(Based on Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37)

Which news caught your ear this week? Was it Flynn or Franken, Pyongyang or Pocahontas, Tillerson or the Tax Bill, Earthquakes or the Royal Engagement? Did you shut it all off and go shopping, or seek some royal DISengagement, to shake off the rising shadows of desperation and despair?

I wish the old prophets and the gospel writers were irrelevant. I wish I could dismiss all the hand-wringing and breast-beating and finger-pointing. I wish I could say, "it's fine, everything's fine, and none of this applies to us." I wish I could just focus on some deep breathing, envision my happy place, and meditate on Oneness and Goodness until all that Prosperity Consciousness kicks in and we reach the Age of Aquarius or Pisces or whatever golden era is next in line.

But what are we supposed to do, when the scandals come faster than we can handle, and real people, people we know and love, are hurting and dying, and everything just keeps cutting closer and closer to the bone?

One hundred years ago, a strange illness started to claim victims. Arriving in the wake of the Spanish Flu epidemic, and obscured by the massive casualties of the first World War, it was little-noticed at first. It started with a sore throat, and led quickly to frightening tremors and hallucinations, then many of the sufferers simply went to sleep and could not wake up. It was dubbed "Encephalitis lethargica," which simply means, "an inflammation of the brain that makes you tired." It was more commonly known as Sleeping Sickness.

The medical profession wasn't sure how to cope with the hundreds of thousands of people who fell ill and lapsed into a catatonic state. For decades, their rigid, unresponsive bodies were housed in charity hospitals and other institutions. They were hopeless cases. No one knew how to wake them up.

In 1969, a young doctor named Oliver Sacks began to work with some of these patients. He wondered what brain activity might be present, inside their frozen forms. He found one patient's brainwaves didn't respond to flashing lights, but jolted into activity when someone said his name. Dr. Sacks was determined to bend the bars of that neurological prison. He tried all kinds of stimuli and interaction. He found some could catch a ball when it was thrown to them. He found some could move their hands, even feed themselves if certain music was played. Bit by bit, he found ways to wake up their damaged nervous systems and re-engage them with their surroundings. But they still couldn't walk on their own. They couldn't move forward, couldn't coordinate their mind and their body to marshal the force of their will. And then, one day, he was working with a woman named Lucy. He could get her up out of her wheelchair, and she could stand on her own. But she couldn't take a single step. And then he happened to bring her into a room where the tiles of the floor were not the usual uniform tan color, but a pattern of alternating dark and light tiles, a checkerboard of black and white. And Lucy's feet began to move. That rigid, frozen woman who could not say a word or even blink her eyes, that woman began to tremble, and then her feet began to shuffle, and she made her way, slowly but purposefully, all the way across those black and white tiles, until she stood at an open window, where the gentle breeze lifted her hair and the sun warmed her face.

It was the pattern of the tiles that unlocked her will. It was the stark contrast of dark and light, one after the other, that made it possible for Lucy to locate herself in space and gauge the distance to her goal, to take that first step, then another, and move forward again. When Dr. Sacks understood the power of that visual pattern, he drew a similar grid on the plain floor of another therapy room, and doubled the size of the world in which Lucy could move.

It was slow, painstaking work. The successes were small, but they mounted from day to day. Dr. Sacks had to learn as much as he could about each patient to find out what stirred a response in them, and the other doctors wanted faster results. So, from the

intensive, personal work of neurological therapy, Dr. Sacks turned to drugs—a new drug, Levadopa, which had been used to treat people with Parkinson's. The drug produced sudden, dramatic changes, but with devastating side effects. Some patients came fully awake and regained their full independence, only to shut down again in a matter of days or weeks. Dr. Sacks witnessed both the opening and shutting of this “chemical window” and shared the journey with his patients through elation to devastation. This became the basis for the film, “Awakenings.”

And now it's Advent—the first Sunday of Advent, and here we are, weighed down by suffering, our voices muted by trauma, our spirits almost immobilized by fear and grief. An abnormally long sleep may seem like a nice alternative.

Yet we have dared, this morning, to light a candle called “hope.” And the only way to keep it from being an empty symbol, the only way to keep it from being a laughable act, is to figure out how each of us can get there, even when it's hard to stay awake, even when it seems impossible to aim ourselves in that direction, and get moving.

How do we do it? Not by reaching for synthetic substances. No chemical window will open us up to hope. No shop window will do that, either. We have to do this the hard way: by finding out what stirs our hearts, what awakens our minds. It takes some trial and error: learning one another's names, and saying those names gently, persistently, until we get a response. Learning what music speaks to our souls, and using that music to help each other stand up. And if you and I really mean it when we say we're seeking hope, there is one more thing we need to do: to recognize the pattern that darkness and light make together. To look ahead, through the coming checkerboard of days, and keep moving from one square to the next, and then the next, and then the next, claiming the promise of this Advent journey, and aiming for the wind and the sun beyond.

--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison

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