



Can you not stay awake with me one hour?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
Ash Wednesday~February 14, 2018*

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Psalms 103:8-14

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| 8 | You are full of compassion and mercy, *
slow to anger and of great kindness. | so is your mercy great upon those who fear you. |
| 9 | You will not always accuse us, *
nor will you keep your anger for ever. | 12 As far as the east is from the west, *
so far have you removed our sins from us. |
| 10 | You have not dealt with us according to our sins, *
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. | 13 As a parent cares for a child, *
so do you care for those who fear you. |
| 11 | For as the heavens are high above the earth, * | 14† For you yourself know wherof we are made; *
you remember that we are but dust. |

II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Can you not stay awake with me one hour?
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The question of Gethsemane is the question of Lent. The question Jesus asks at the end of these 40 days boomerangs to meet us right here, on Ash Wednesday.

It's the question Jesus cries out when he discovers his disciples sleeping...sleeping after asking them to stay awake awake while he prayed, that fateful night before his crucifixion.

They didn't, of course. They couldn't. Or maybe wouldn't.

They couldn't abide with him while he prayed his way through that dark night, before his death... his soul aggrieved and agitated, as he begged that the cup of death might pass him by.

They could not stay awake. Even as he suffered.

All of Lent leads us to this moment. Leads to Gethsemane. To: can you stay awake?

Because the easiest thing to do is to sleep. To turn it all off. To refuse to hear the story. To refuse to take the journey. To refuse to find ourselves at the foot of the cross. Where we inevitably find ourselves weeping.

Because to stay awake IS to weep. And to weep is to have been involved. And to have been involved is to most certainly be changed.

And the last thing most of us really want is to be changed. To have our hearts broken open.

And so, we get involved in all kinds of projects to avoid that breaking. Projects that we think are all about awakening, all about spiritual growth. Projects like Lent.

You see, I'm really not so sure about Lent. I'm really not sure that Lent is always very good for us. Because Lent can make us think that we can do a whole bunch of things that will get us a deeper connection with God. That with enough devotional reading and sugar avoidance, we'll arrive in the promised land, we'll have made it.

We can so easily get so busy with our Lenten projects. So busy that we end up not hearing God's eternal whisper: Wake Up. Wake Up. Wake Up.

Because that's all of it, really... the whole spiritual life: waking up.

Coming face-to-face with reality as it really is, rather than endlessly sugar-coating it and dressing it up in pretty clothes, and trying to convince ourselves that everything Is Okay. Because it isn't. And I'm going to smear ash on your forehead to remind you: It's not all okay. You're not okay. I'm not okay.

In my experience: admitting that "it's not all okay," and that we can't seem to make it all okay, no matter how hard we try...well, that's the first step toward freedom.

Because telling the truth—the truth that we can't do it on our own—allows space—finally—for God. The God we box out with all our efforts at self control, self sufficiency, and self promotion.

When it comes right down to it, there's really not all that much room for God in most of our lives. And I think we tend to be pretty content with this, because our God is a God who somehow ended up dying on a cross. And that's really a pretty terrible thing. It's not something that makes much rational sense. Not something that feels very safe or comforting. Not something that inspires us to enthusiastically join up as followers.

In fact, the Cross—well, it's really just about the worst thing. This God of ours doesn't really seem to know how to be God. Doesn't seem to know that God's job is to be mighty and powerful.

This God of ours appears to be a mess. A straight up failure at being God. A godforsaken God.

And yet. Hear once again some of my favorite of Paul's words...

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Just as foolishness and weakness are paradoxical good news... so too, then, are ashes. So, too, is the truth that we can't earn our way to God. That we're mostly just too tired, weak, and worn for earning.

The good news is that so often right at that moment when we can't, when we fully admit that we

Just

Cannot

Do It...

...Jesus reaches out his hand to us through the shards of our shattered religiosity. Jesus reaches down, clasps our hands tenderly, and says: "come home, come home." Come_on_home.

And so we go. Because nothing sounds better than home. We go, singing the song of saints throughout the ages:

Precious Lord,
take my hand,
lead me on, help me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on
to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
lead me home.

We don't really have to try so hard, you see. We just have to be hungry. Hungry for home. Just plain old hungry.

That's why we fast. To get hungry. To get hungry enough to know we need the bread of heaven. To become awake

to our deepest needs...

Our need of God Our need of one another. Because in the end, isn't church just a bunch of beggars showing other beggars where to find some bread?

We need this journey of getting hungry and waking up...if we'll allow Lent to be that. But it's hard to do alone. We're going to Gethsemane, and then to Calvary. And you'll probably need someone to weep with there, at the foot of the Cross.

So let's walk together. We don't have to go it alone. Will you walk with me?

Amen.