

“Stay Awake,” Christa J Fisher
Matthew 24.36-44

November 27, 2016

In today’s lesson Jesus speaks about the necessity being alert, of paying attention, and he uses flooding and theft to emphasize his point. I don’t have experience with either of these examples, but I do know something about being caught off-guard and the ramifications of not paying attention.

Nearly twenty years ago and a good friend and I participated in the AIDS Ride - a 5-day, 500-mile bicycle ride beginning in Minneapolis and ending in Chicago.

(I’ve just begun my story and now I need to pause: Before I go on, I need you to know that despite how this story ends, my friend and I did participate in the ride. We completed all 500 miles. I don’t want this to be a lingering question at the end of the sermon. I want you to be thinking about your own relationship with God rather than my bicycle ride. Got it? Good. Now, back to the story.)

On the eve of the ride we slept at my friend’s family’s home just outside the Twin Cities. Her aunt and uncle and her youngest cousin were away for the weekend but her two twenty-something cousins were home. They decided to throw a party. I don’t think it was in honor of us. I think it was in fact simply a coincidence – the parents are gone and you are here so let’s party - but after all of our training and hard work we were happy to believe that the more than 50 people gathered were there to celebrate us! And we had a great time that night. Somebody brought a DJ system so we had good, loud music for dancing. There was plenty to drink and just enough to eat. There were lots of new people to meet and urgent, exciting conversations to have. And most importantly the parents were gone. It was a great night! The party went late, I don’t know how late because my friend and I went to bed before the party ended, knowing we had a big day ahead of us and needed our rest.

To be expected, the alarm clock went off much too early the next morning. I tried to hit the snooze button, to give myself just five more minutes of rest but my hand kept missing the clock. I was too exhausted to open my eyes so my hand was just swatting at the air. In my fairly delirious state I had a moment of clarity and remembered I was not at home and my alarm clock was not on the table next to the bed. The sound I was hearing, was coming from outside my room. I hollered for someone to “shut it off,” but it persisted. I eventually pulled myself out of bed to see what was going on and when I opened the door to the bedroom I was overcome with heat and smoke. The house was ablaze.

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. (Matthew 24.38-39)

I was in a third-story bedroom and the most immediate way out was down the stairs, through the smoke, and into the heat. I know now that my actions were ridiculously dangerous, but I was in a state of panic and was not thinking clearly. I was caught off guard – completely unprepared. I grabbed my backpack and ran towards the fire.

Waves of thick, black smoke engulfed me as I descended the stairs. My eyes burned and my nostrils stung. Holding my breath, I searched for light – a sign to help orient me in the darkness, to show me the way out. I crawled through the kitchen where the charred counter tops were littered with empty glass liquor bottles melting like cheap candles; the aluminum cans were now puddles on the floor. Off the kitchen was another stair case leading to the ground level. As I ran down the stairs flames were gyrating along the walls, lapping at my arms and legs. I joined my friend and her cousins on the side walk where we stood, with bare feet in minimal clothing, covered in soot with hair singed, watching the house and everything in it burn. Our two bikes, flocked with ash, lay on the grass behind us.

Today's scripture is part of a much longer sequence of sayings, which are prompted by two questions from the disciples "When will we finally be free from Roman rule?" And "When will your rule begin?" Jesus responds first, by saying, "Things will get much, much worse before they get better and you need to be paying attention." He tells them "The time leading up to freedom will be like the time leading up to the flood, the earth will be filled with violence. It will be so bad, in fact, that families will be torn apart, communities fractured, and it will happen right before your eyes. People will be in the fields, laboring under the scorching heat of the mid-day sun, and the government will come take them, simply snatch them up, never to be seen again. And it won't just happen in the fields. People will be pulled from their homes too. One moment a woman will be preparing dinner and the next minute she'll be gone. Stolen from her family, torn from her children's embrace."

Jesus is not prophesying about God's end-time wrath as some Christian authors suggest. He is warning the disciples about the reality of living as God's faithful people within an Empire whose motto is "peace by the sword" – an Empire which prioritizes wealth, power and control over the life and welfare of God's people. And true to his predictions, a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection the children of Yahweh revolted, demanding to be treated as full citizens while rejecting pressures to assimilate. The Roman military descended upon them like a plague, destroying everyone and everything in sight. "Things will get much, much worse before they get better," Jesus said. "You need to be prepared. You must remain alert."

We found out later that day that the cause of the fire was a cigarette. Someone had fallen asleep on the couch in the basement and their cigarette, still hot, fell between two cushions where it slowly and silently smoldered before eventually igniting into a flame and then into a full-blown fire. We had all been warned as children about the dangers of smoking and fires caused by cigarettes. In fact, one of the party rules was "no smoking in the house," for fear of fire. Had we all been alert, ensuring that the rules

which governed this home were followed, this fire would have been avoided. Had someone remained awake, this fire might have been contained.

If the owner of the house had known in what night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. (Matthew 24.43)

To the disciples second question, “When will your rule begin?” Jesus responds with what I expect they thought to be an odd answer. They were likely asking him when he’d assume the throne and usher in a new age, where the Jewish people would be free to be themselves and worship their God. “When will you become our king?” they were asking. “One month, one year, ten years? How long must we endure like this?” And Jesus tells them, “I have no idea. No one knows when that day will come. Only God knows this. But until that time, stay alert, be prepared, keep watch. For when I do return, my reign will come like a flood, I will engulf and overwhelm you.”

This is not a threat. It is a promise – a promise that

one day this human story will be swept up in a sea of love,
like a child in the womb you will be enveloped in the waters of mercy and grace,
and the tide will pulse the heartbeat of God,
a perpetual ebb and flow of peace and justice.

When will this day come, who knows? But as we wait, Jesus tells us, “Stay alert. Not only alert to danger, but also to life.”

The firefighters gave us a tour of the house later that day and they were insistent we see one room. We silently processed through the charred skeleton of what was once a home, mourning that which had been lost, confounded by how quickly it all happened, and anxious about what lie ahead. The room they wanted us to see was less than 10 feet from the epicenter of the fire – from the cigarette which consumed the couch which destroyed the home. The door to the room had remained closed

throughout the party and the fire. And when the fire fighters opened the door, they revealed a room in perfect condition – snowflake white walls, a downy bed beckoning for rest, pictures of a family still dreaming of the future, and an arsenal of guns and ammunition. Had that door not been closed, the firefighters explained to us, the room and the ammunition would have caught fire, the house would have exploded and we would have died. At the epicenter of the inferno, which destroyed everything in this house, was a sanctuary. A place set aside and made holy for the purpose of preserving life. “Be alert,” Jesus says, “Not only for danger, but also for life.”

The disciples asked Jesus when his rule would begin and he said “someday.” Today we can look at the cross and know that that day has already begun. Through his death and resurrection Jesus has made clear that God is in control and there is nothing more powerful than the power of God’s love. Jesus, driven by God’s love, willingly opened the door to the house ablaze with fire and for our sake he plunged into the smoke and into the heat so that we might be saved. He did this for us and we can therefore be assured that whenever we face personal or communal fires, whenever we are surrounded by darkness, struggling to see, gasping for breath, and running in a panicked frenzy, Jesus is with us, he is holding our hands, leading us through the heat and the smoke towards light and life. This cross is our constant reminder that God’s reign has already begun and the new creation is all around us.

Wherever you see life, you are seeing the new creation.

Whenever you feel courageous, God is at work.

Whenever you find peace, the Spirit is moving.

Whenever you demand justice, Jesus is speaking.

Whenever you offer or receive forgiveness, the Spirit is tending.

Whenever you experience reconciliation, Jesus is rejoicing.

Whenever you are overwhelmed by love, the Spirit is shining.

And whenever you see a glimmer of light through the smoke and flames,

you are in the presence of the power of God.



Someday Jesus will return and he promises to come like a tidal-wave, engulfing you in love, quenching all the fires which seek to keep you from him. Until that day, stay alert. But do not be afraid. You are not called to walk through fires alone. Jesus, whose reign began on the cross, is with you. Through the Holy Spirit he is creating sanctuaries where life can thrive and love can grow, and he is holding your hand, leading you out of darkness towards light and life.

AMEN.

