

March 30, 2014 – Fourth Sunday of Lent

“Awakening to the Light” – Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: *1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41*

When I was in junior high, I woke up in the middle of the night – it was probably 2:30 am or so – got dressed, went downstairs and ate breakfast and then left the house to wait for the bus at the end of our 1/3 of a mile driveway. One of my parents caught up with me before I reached the end of the driveway. When I awoke in the morning, I remembered none of it.

Sometimes, when I was younger especially, in that space between waking and sleep, I used to hear full orchestras, organ music and sometimes even electric guitars. Sometimes, particularly when there were trumpets, they were loud enough to wake me up.

Dreams fascinate me and I have gained some tremendous personal insight by examining my dreams. Much of my fascination with dreams comes from the other direction. I am very interested in what it means to “wake up”, to “be illuminated”, as the early Christians used to call the process of coming to know Christ and the light of God. The early baptism rituals took place at night and were meant to reflect the state of unknowing and darkness – the dream world – and the process of coming into the light – an awakened life in Christ.

Scripture takes dreams very seriously and they appear throughout the Old and the New Testament. Jacob dreams of a ladder from heaven to earth, and knows God has been present with him. You may remember Joseph, Jacob's son who was sold into slavery to Pharaoh and rose to very high ranks by interpreting the dreams of prisoner and leader alike. Or think of Peter's dream of the sheet filled with animals spilling down out of the heavens. This dream gave Peter the courage to set out to speak to the Gentiles and to recognize “*God knows no partiality*”. Dreams in the ancient world were seen as messages from the Divine.

In philosophical circles, this view led to issues in defining the nature of reality. If dreams are messages from the Divine, how do we know when we are dreaming and when we are not? As Chuang Tzu, one of the great Taoist philosophers from China, once said, “*I dreamed I was a butterfly, flitting around in the sky; then I awoke. Now I wonder: Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?*” When you think about such a thing and entertain it for even a few moments, there really is no way to tell, is there?

When Paul tells us, “*Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead (come back from the world of dreams, would be another way of saying this) and Christ will shine upon you*”, he is making a deep philosophical statement about the nature of reality. The truth of reality is only known in the light of Jesus Christ, he says. The rest is a dream world, a dream state, an illusion of the mind and the soul lost in the darkness of the world and the spirit. Elsewhere, Paul uses the phrase, “*Put on Jesus Christ*”. Live as an awakened being in the world of dreams.

The process of awakening to Jesus Christ and who he actually is is given to us in our story today about the man born blind. Right at the beginning, Jesus tells the disciples, “*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world*”. We see light because Christ gives us light. Think of our coming into a relationship with Jesus Christ as those

moments when we are waking up from the night. How does the world come together? Are we simply moving from one dream to another dream; or are we awakening into a deeper reality, a world which is now defined by Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit? *“Sleeper, awake!”*

The space between sleeping and waking is hazy; it is very difficult to pay attention to how the world is coming together in those moments. We assume much in the process and expect the windows to all be in the same place, the house to be on the same street, the people you know to be around you again. These things are not stable in the dream world. How reality comes together in the space between dreaming and waking requires us to slow down and wake up at the same time. You can see this progression of the man born blind from sleeping to waking in his experience of coming to a relationship with Jesus Christ. In the man's first confrontation with the people of Jerusalem after he has been healed by Jesus and by washing in the Pools of Siloam, he simply refers to his healer as *“The man called Jesus”*. This is the blind man's first testimony, and it is ours as well. Jesus was a human being like us.

The Pharisees are upset because Jesus made mud on the Sabbath. Interestingly, they are not upset about the miracle itself; they are upset that Jesus did work on the Sabbath. They argue about who Jesus actually is if he is doing these things on the Sabbath. Then they ask the blind man, *“What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”* The blind man says, *“He is a prophet.”* This is the blind man's second testimony. Jesus is a human being and a prophet.

Doubt begins to enter into the controversy when some wonder if the man had actually been blind since birth. So they call his parents in. The Pharisees try to manipulate the parents to either testify against their son or to say Jesus was the Messiah. One answer will destroy the family; the other answer will get the parents kicked out of the Temple. The parents simply say, *“Our son can speak for himself. Ask him.”* So they call the blind man back and immediately proclaim Jesus a sinner. The blind man says, *“I don't know if he is a sinner. What I do know is that once I was blind, but now I see.”* The discussion goes on. The blind man has to tell the story again. In frustration, he says, *“It sounds to me like you all want to become his disciples. Is that what you want?”* Now the Pharisees are upset. They want to know where Jesus comes from, which the blind man finds interesting. *“You do not know where he comes from and yet he opened my eyes. We know God does not listen to sinners, but does listen to the one who worships him and obeys God's will...If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”* This is the blind man's third testimony. Jesus is a man, a prophet and he is from God. And this gets the blind man kicked out of the temple.

Here, the dream has come apart. This is the space between dreams and wakefulness. Reality has not yet come together, but there is the awareness that what had gone before was all a dream. *Seeing* is at once *what we see with our eyes* and also *what we know from what we see* and also *what we believe about what we see*. Those who were supposed to have sight, the Pharisees, seem to become more blind to what is happening. They see less and less about Jesus, while the man who has never seen but now can see more and more. *“Sleeper, awake!”*

When I was at the monastery, I met one of the novitiates, a young man named Brendan, or Brother Brendan, as he went by with the brothers who lived there. Brendan was only 23 years old. Brendan's father, Chuck, told me that he had brought Brendan to the monastery to do some work several years ago and Brendan said, *“Dad,*

I don't ever want to go back there. Don't make me talk to the monks." But they came back for work days, and then one day, Brendan announced to his family he wanted to join the Benedictine brothers at St. Benedict's Abbey.

I asked Brendan what caused him to realize he was called to be a monk. Brendan said that he was sitting in the living room thinking about what was important in his life. He was playing a video game. His life, he said, was filled with video games, movies and surface concerns. It wasn't bad and it wasn't good. But he began to realize he wanted his life to matter and that was when he began to seriously consider the life of prayer and devotion that the monks exhibited.

He said, *"Now, my life makes sense and matters."* I asked what his friends thought. He said he had lost a few, some thought it was pretty neat and only a few were really supportive. And then he said, *"But I am not here for them or because of them and what they think. I am here because of Jesus and the Cross."* *Sleeper, awake.*

Awakening from the dream, as Brendan did and was doing, is not a simple and easy process. There is suffering and there is pain involved. We must let go of many things. As we get closer to Easter, it is important to remember Jesus didn't skip over this part either. We want to go directly from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without having to experience the betrayal of Maundy Thursday after the Last Supper, without having to watch and experience Jesus going to the Cross and without having to experience the emptiness and darkness of soul and heart of Dark Saturday.

But we cannot skip over Good Friday and Dark Saturday and assume that all the light Jesus and God offer to us is accessible to us. Christ's suffering and death must be confronted, just as our own suffering and death must be confronted. In that confrontation, the light of Christ shines on all which holds us away from God and our relationship with Jesus Christ. The rightness of our judgments and attitudes towards others; the rightness of our remembrance of all the wrongs that have been committed against us; the justifications of all the good things we have done; the rightness of all our politics, beliefs and reasonable explanations for ourselves and others – these are all dreams, chthonic/underground figures, shadows upon the wall of the cave of our minds. *"Sleeper, awake!"*

Awakening to God and Christ means the light of Christ shines onto the shadows and objects in our minds and souls which block us from God. In places we never imagined or thought of, that light shines forth and brings into stark view things we must look upon if we are to truly know God. In the light of that Great Morning Star, we suffer as we witness the death of our old self. There, we share in the trials and in the Cross of Jesus Christ. But we, as followers of Jesus, do not shy away from this experience. Instead, we go with Jesus into Gethsemane and pray with him. There, in the garden, Jesus tells his disciples and us, *"Keep awake and pray you do not come into the time of trial."* Or, to paraphrase, do not allow yourself to return to the dream. This is very difficult. It is very hard to confront the death of the old self. It is far easier to *"Sleep!"* And often we do, like the disciples.

The process of awakening is slow, but when it comes, it does so because Jesus is with us. When the blind man gets kicked out of the temple, he is found by Jesus, who sits with him. Imagine all the new things this man sees. Imagine all that becomes clear to him in his seeing. Jesus says to the man born blind, *"Do you believe in the Son of Man?"* Do you believe in the light of Christ which has shown upon you? Do you believe in the one who has awakened you from the dream and lifted you out of the darkness

of spiritual blindness? Do you believe in the Son of Man? “*Who is he*” the blind man asks. “*You have **seen** him, and the one who is speaking to you is he*”, Jesus says. Then the blind man says, “*Lord, I believe.*” Jesus is a man, a prophet, from God and the Messiah, the Son of Man. Lord, I believe. Lord, now I am awake.

The Lord says to Samuel as the prophet is trying to figure out who God has chosen to succeed Saul as king, “*Do not look on his appearance...the Lord does not see as mortals see; mortals look upon outward appearances (dreams), but the Lord looks on the heart (reality)*”. When we awaken to the presence of Christ, like the man born blind, we awaken to a world ignited with the light of God. We begin to see things as they are from God's perspective. We begin to understand that God has already overcome the sleep of death, darkness and deception. This has happened whether we sleep or not. The light of Christ seeks to fall upon you, just as it fell upon David, just as it fell upon the disciples, just as it fell upon the man born blind.

Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead (come back from the world of dreams, would be another way of saying this) and Christ will shine upon you.

Amen.