

“Could you not keep awake one hour?”

[Mark 14:37]

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Or as Proverbs 6:9 more lightheartedly asks: How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep?

Which is almost more fitting as we find Jesus decidedly human in this scene from Gethsemane. Mark writes that Jesus is distressed and agitated [v.33]; and that he even throws himself down on the ground pleading with his Father to let the cup of his imminent death pass before him [v.35]. Would these not be our own mortal emotions and behaviors?

And yet often we forget that sort of humanity when we conjure up images of our Christ. Instead, we trap him behind the stained glass and in frescoes with levitating haloes, and even distort his true earthly appearance, fancifully thinking of him as white skinned with goldilocks when most assuredly he was quite brown and rather simple in appearance (to quote the famous first century historian, Josephus). Moreover, we somehow misplace in our memory that lesson from Sunday School on the shortest verse in our entire biblical text – that one forged out of pure emotion and inescapable human despair, namely -- Jesus wept (John 11:35).

And now here in Mark, Jesus is angry. He is troubled. He is afraid... and rightly so for the task before him is great beyond measure. Albert Schweitzer (theologian, philosopher, medical missionary and organist) wrote in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus* that Jesus “lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. But it refuses to turn, and so he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions he has destroyed them in his death. And thus the wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is his victory and his reign.”

Victories and reigns aside (as well as the difficult imagery) that wheel truly frightened our savior. Our NRSV translation quotes Jesus as saying to his disciples: “I am deeply grieved, even to death.” The Greek however yields a more powerful emotional disturbance: “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to the point of death... remain here and stay awake.” Jesus was not only agitated and distressed as witnessed a verse earlier, but his very soul was overtaken and burdened by sorrow. He knew what awaited him as the unmoved wheel stood ever before him. And at that sight, he was alone and afraid. “Let this cup pass before me.” Like one of our own dying in a hospital room surrounded by family, Jesus only wanted the same. He wanted his disciples, his friends, his family to stay awake as he prayed. To be there when he got back. To be alert and watchful for his return so to share this last night with him before Judas his betrayer was at hand.

And yet they couldn't. The man whom they left their families to follow, their messiah who just shared a last supper with them...their friend... was afraid and alone and about to be handed over for arrest, and yet on three separate occasions they fell asleep, though asked otherwise, and allowed time to pass unwatched. [Now I promise I won't allow this sermon also to devolve into the numerology of 3, but just know that it symbolizes perfection – and therefore, the disciples' perfect display of ignorance; one of the major themes of Mark's gospel].

How miserable then it must have been for Jesus to come upon them like that, to realize that once again they didn't listen and once more didn't understand. "Enough!" he exclaims (vs.41). Again, a very human response and something you can rather imagine a parent saying to a child who refused to properly learn right from wrong. The Greek word here for *enough* is also interesting: it is an impersonal verb that was widely used to receipt a bill that was paid in full; and given the immediate context, it means that the disciples' chances to prove faithful are over and the account book on them is closed.<sup>1</sup>

Which might seem to some of us a bit harsh as we can somewhat sympathize with these disciples. After all, here they were living their lives as mere fishermen and jacks of their trade and along comes the Incarnation with a Word very much unlike that of their tradition. Furthermore, most of these men were not scholars of scripture nor even were they likely literate (Acts 4:13 seems to confirm this). And thus, it would have been rather difficult, don't you agree, for them to fully grasp all of Jesus' parables and in particular this ministry focused on the cross. In a sense then, both their ignorance and collective sleep in this last hour, was like a pre-existent adaptation of the psychological theory of Learned Helplessness.

In a landmark experiment of the late 1960's, Martin Seligman and Steve Maier studied the effects of pain on dogs -- I know, I can barely imagine it and doubt it would be considered ethical today. But if you don't know about this study, please research it in full as 1) it offers important psychological insight into our behaviors and; 2) I'm only going to provide the barest of sketches. As such, I quote the ever reliable (though in this case it is) Wikipedia. "In Part 2 of the Seligman and Maier experiment, three groups of dogs were tested in a shuttle-box apparatus, in which the dogs could escape electric shocks by jumping over a low partition. For the most part, the Group 3 dogs, who had previously learned that nothing they did had any effect on the shocks, simply lay down passively and whined. Even though they could have easily escaped the shocks, the dogs didn't try. The emotional stress that the dogs experienced when learning that the trauma is uncontrollable, produced failure to escape."

Now, I don't contend that the disciples were traumatized by our Redeemer within a Skinner Box of pain. But similar to the dogs in group 3, one could say that the disciples weren't of the same mind as the controller (Christ) as they couldn't work out the why's or the how's of his teachings; and thus after a great deal of effort spent deciphering and indeed failing at learning, they gave up, lied down, closed their eyes and went to sleep. Our first excuse for them this night.

And lest we forget, they had just been fed a last supper! Lord knows what happens to our own eyes after a hearty meal. And mind you, this was on the heels of celebrating Passover; after being lectured lesson after lesson; and of course after physically walking with Jesus all around both

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<sup>1</sup> The New Interpreters Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version. 2003.

native and foreign lands. Their eyelids, just like yours and mine, were but made of muscles. And like all of our other muscles after prolonged use and exposure, eyelids get tired such that they resort to their more natural and relaxed state of non-use and closure. Our second excuse this night.

Additionally, finally, and rather metaphorically, with the presence of light (namely, Jesus) quickly diminishing from their lives (he was about to be arrested and committed to death) the disciples were overtaken by greater darkness and thereby succumbed to it. Typically we associate 'light' and 'darkness' with John's gospel, but it's present in Mark as well, especially as just a chapter earlier Jesus prophesies about his end in such terms when paraphrasing the prophet Ezekiel (Mark 13:24): "But in those days, after the suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light." And like most of us when going to sleep, we close the shades and turn off the lights. Truly, how many of us sleep with the lights on full? And for those who sleep to a program on TV – stop! It's not good for you! Studies have shown that it can yield depression amongst other aversive effects... And thus our third excuse this night. It's almost as if they were overexposed to the Light. Their minds couldn't function properly in its presence; they were exhausted, tired and their brains confused. And now that this Light was finally departing from them, darkness greeted them in kind.

Yes, but what does all of that mean for us? Should we not fault the disciples for falling asleep, even though they were asked otherwise by their friend and savior who was alone and afraid? Or should we ourselves go sleep deprived, as was asked of the 12, keeping ever awake and watchful for his presence and physical return? It would have certainly been easier to preach from the standard, arguing that the disciples were fools and wholly inconsiderate, but in doing so that would also surely indict the lot of us. Which maybe is the point?

For surely, we all see what's going on in the world around us -- famine, destruction, rape, bigotry, war -- all happening everywhere at once, from our own soil to the four corners of the earth. And as Jesus' newest disciples we are charged to stay awake and alert to those corners as well as our own, and to be present for all who are in need. But... the world is so big, and especially right now. We truly live in a globalized village. We sign online, turn on the TV, or even (for those who still) open a paper, and are immediately transported to the tremors that erupt in geographies and locations that we were previously unaware of. And we're bombarded by this daily. We are overstimulated, and most certainly, desensitized to the grief and sorrows of this world, such that often we feel helpless against its machine of overt cruelty. So much so that eventually we turn away, saying that we've seen enough this day and for days to come. For in the end, we are but human and mortal; there is only so much we can do or see. And so we sleep and try to recharge before waking and making sense of it all again.

And ultimately that will always be what separates him from us. For Jesus embarked on a mission none of us could ever truly imagine and even though he was taken in by moments of humanity and uncertainty, this one immeasurably great man nonetheless pushed forward and climbed upon that wheel of history. And so if nothing else then, we as his disciples must always be aware of **that**. Tonight and all nights, we are to be watchful of that sacrifice so that come Sunday we can awake to understand that accomplishment. Amen.