

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, September 7, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"CHURCH. WAKE FROM SLEEP!"

Romans 13:11

Those of us who are parents of teenagers have likely noticed a change in their sleep patterns over the last week. The typical waking time for a teenager during the summer is 10 or 11 A.M. or 12 Noon, but not this week. Last week a Zits cartoon showed teenaged Jeremy in bed as his alarm clock goes off at 7:10 A.M. "Beep, beep, beep". Jeremy doesn't budge. At 7:11 the alarm clock puts out arms and goes "Beep! Beep! Beep!" a bit louder. Still no reaction from Jeremy, so at 7:12 A.M., the alarm clock jumps onto the bed, picks up Jeremy's head with one hand, and gives him a face rub with the other, shouting "BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!" Jeremy sits up with his eyes half closed, saying, "I hate my alarm clock." And his Mother puts her head in his room asking, "Are you up yet?"

In chapter 13, verse 11 the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." Now Paul is not speaking of physical sleep. The Bible indicates that God intends for us to sleep well, as every night we hand over our cares and our very lives to Him. The Psalmist says, "God gives to his beloved sleep;" and further "The Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps; he is your keeper; he will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore..."

So when Paul says, "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep" he is referring to waking up from spiritual sleep. Now God does give rest to our souls. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest." But rest for our souls should not be confused with spiritual slumber. Spiritual sleep is a negative spiritual state, brought on by the tempter, who seeks our destruction. And we can easily go to sleep spiritually. It's happened to many who once took part in the worship and work of the church but have now dropped out of sight. But even when it's not so dramatic, it can still happen to us, often very subtly. We lose a sense of spiritual urgency. Our ears become closed to God's word and God's call. Our hearts and minds become dulled by the things of this world. The glorious promises of our faith no longer stir us or fill us with wonder and hope.

Now some of us here today are wide awake spiritually. And that's great. But I suspect that after the summer season some of us may need to wake up

spiritually. So Paul exhorts us as he exhorted the Romans, "Church, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep..." And just as we need an alarm clock and our morning coffee to wake us from physical sleep, so we need God's help to wake us from spiritual slumber. In these moments, God is waking us from spiritual sleep. In this hour God is using all the resources of worship to make us alive and alert Christians.

First, God is waking us up to opportunities for learning, for service and for sharing.

The truth is that many Christians never move beyond an elementary faith. But without growth our faith will stagnate and weaken, and even more dangerously we can be blown this way and that by the winds of noxious doctrine. But digging in to Scripture and growing deeper in Christian teaching strengthens us personally and it strengthens the church. It honours God. I am committed to making every Thursday night a night for study and growth in faith. I am going to lead or help lead study programs through this fall, winter and spring. Some will be a few weeks, some will perhaps stretch over 2 or 3 months. Now I don't expect every course will appeal to everyone, but I hope most of you will find one that does. God is waking us up to opportunities for learning and growing deeper in faith.

God is also waking us up to opportunities for service. Jesus said, "I came not to be served, but to serve." As those redeemed into God's family through Christ, we belong to a fellowship of servers. Nearly every week the bulletin contains opportunities for service in the church. Every week we should be asking ourselves, "Is this an area of service to which God is calling me?" A church can't thrive and grow if all the work is being done by 10% of its members. God has given each one of us some gift for Christian service and wakes us up to opportunities for service.

Then too, God is waking us up to opportunities for sharing our faith. Christianity has always been a missionary faith, with the good news of Jesus Christ being shared in various ways. That's how the church has always grown, and continues to grow. But somehow we've bought into the idea that faith is strictly private, to be held as tightly as a child clutches a loonie she finds on the sidewalk. We forget that the Gospel is a matter of life and death, of heaven and hell, that all people need the grace God provides in Christ and that the time for a decision is limited. Someone said, "If the apostles had held the notion of a private faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ wouldn't have gotten beyond the suburbs of Jerusalem." If faith was just private, you and I wouldn't have it. For somewhere along the way, a parent, a friend, a Sunday school teacher told us

the story of Jesus and his love. One course I may run later in the year is Bill Hybel's "Just Walk Across the Room" a 4 week program on how we can share faith with others in a natural and inviting way. God is waking us up to opportunities for sharing the faith, along with opportunities for learning and for serving.

Secondly, God is waking us up to the subtle nature of evil.

Don't laugh at or dismiss the reality of evil. Jesus didn't. Jesus knew the tempter's power so well. And it was only by complete reliance on God's word and God's power that he won the victory. Jesus has his followers pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (or the evil one)." Evil is real and it is subtle. How else do we explain so much of the distress in the world and in people's lives? Why is it that people so easily turn aside to lies? Why do we give in to greed, lust, anger and pride? Why do we begin to accept sub-Christian behaviour as normal? Evil infects and distorts even the good we do. As someone said, "There is a problem, then a solution and then we must find a solution to the solution." Nothing ever quite works as well as we hope.

Now we can get rid of the picture of the Devil with horns and hooves and a fork, but we dare not dismiss the reality of the evil one or ignore his crafty ways. The adversary is the deceiver, the father of lies, and disguises himself as an angel of light. In fact, the evil one's most devious ploy is to convince us that he doesn't exist. And then people fall asleep while evil prospers. And as John Burke said, "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good people do nothing."

But God is waking us up us to the reality and the subtlety of evil. "Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep." God helps us to fend off evil and its schemes with the truth of God's word and the help of Christ who is our champion. As Paul says, "Let us then lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day...Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

I know a man who decided that he didn't want a certain TV cable channel coming into his home, tempting him and his children. So he cancelled it. Now it cost him something, because in order to get rid of it he had to cancel a cable package which includes TSN. And as a sports fan he misses that, but he was willing to pay the price, in order to battle the degrading schemes of the evil one. Christians, God is waking us up to the reality and the subtlety of evil.

"You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep."

Finally, in these moments God is waking us up to the promise of our faith.

It surprises me when Christians think of our faith as dull and unexciting. The story of our faith and its promises should continually lift our hearts with hope. The Christian faith is no fairy tale, but rooted in history, centred on the Eternal Son of God becoming flesh for our sake. The Christian Gospel is the story of God's unearned, suffering love for this fallen world. The Gospel has to do with Jesus' life, his teachings, his mighty works, his atoning death for our sins, his resurrection victory, his ascension to heaven, his promise to come again to complete God's Kingdom. Dig into the Gospels and you'll find the story of Jesus is anything but dull. His was the most glorious life ever lived. And what God has done for us in Christ is wondrous indeed. In Christ God acted to move us from darkness to light, to save us from the power of sin and evil and death, not because we had earned it, but because God so loves the world and each one of us.

And by faith we have already "put on Christ" so that when God looks at us now he sees us not with all our sins and brokenness. Rather, He sees us as he sees Christ, covered with Christ's righteousness, pure in heart, heaven-bound children of light. And the promise of our faith is not just for the future. It is for the present. Everyday we can put on the Lord Jesus Christ, walk in his light, receive his strength, his grace, and share his love with others. We are never alone. Jesus is living with us and within us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our Christian faith is summed up in the Apostles' Creed. This is the faith that once turned the world upside once and will do it again, and is doing it even now. It is the faith that turns our own lives upside down and makes us loving, forgiven, hope-filled, children of God forever. God is waking us up to the glorious promises and the hope of our faith. In this Holy Sacrament today may each of us commit our fully lives to Christ, put him on by faith, and go on spreading and living the Gospel of our Lord.