

"WOKE!"  
Romans 13:8-14  
September 6, 2020  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Are you WOKE?

Are you alert to the injustice in our society? Are you aware of the ugly reality of racism that infects our nation like a virus? Are you horrified by the murders of innocent black people at the hands of police? Are you angry each time the president offers words of support to white supremacists?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then you are WOKE- or you are at least waking up to the atrocities that too many people face every single day.

I know that I am preaching to a majority white congregation today. I also know that I am "preaching to the choir," that many of you have been aware of these concerns and have been standing against them for years, and some of you have been in this fight for longer than I have been alive. I honor your steadfast struggle for justice and equality.

The word "Woke," is slang that comes from African American Vernacular English and it has become a simple way to describe those who are wide awake to the injustice that is, sadly, alive and well in our country and our world. It is also a call to action. Once you are aware of the way things are you cannot possibly sit passively and do nothing about it.

Even the Apostle Paul knew what it meant to be woke. He wrote to people in Rome centuries ago, people who lived lives we cannot even imagine. As followers of Jesus Christ, they were a minority living in the center of the powerful and brutal Roman Empire.

Everything they believed was in opposition to the world of the emperor who demanded to be called "the son of god." The Christians in Rome met together as small house churches. Every day was a struggle to live in the way of Jesus which was, of course, not the way of Rome. Some Christian leaders were expelled by various emperors. In later years, both Paul and Peter were among Christians murdered in Rome when the great fire under the emperor Nero was blamed on Christians. Not only were they dealing with conflict outside of the church, they also had conflicts between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians within the church.

Paul had not yet been to Rome but was hoping to visit soon. He wrote to encourage them in their faith and to help them to deal with their conflicts within the church . He wrote to warn them not to lose sight of what was most important.

He wrote: " *But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work that began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, we must not squander these precious daylight hours. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ and be up and about!*" (The Message, Romans 13:11-14)

Paul's warning here takes on a new urgency in our time. I am observing a new phenomenon in myself and in others that I call "Pandemic paralysis." If we were just dealing with the pandemic right now, it would be hard but I think it would be manageable. But the fact that we are dealing with the pandemic **and** the chaos in our government **and** the uprisings against equality it all feels like too much to handle.

Add to that the incredible stress on parents, students, and teachers who are trying to navigate a new school year. How many of us are "absorbed and exhausted in taking care of our day to day obligations?"

Like many pastors I know, I feel as though I am working twice as hard and getting half as much done.

Living in chaos is exhausting. How many days do you feel as though you are sleepwalking through the hours? How often do you want to just ignore everything and live in your own little bubble? Who just wants to sleep through it all?

Tuning out the chaos is a privilege that most people don't have.

Perhaps Paul's words to the Christians in Rome resonate more with us now than ever before. Paul tells them- and he tells us- that what happens now genuinely matters. What we do now matters. He believes that the Christian faith makes a difference. He calls the Christians in Rome to wake up because their task is to work with God in transforming the world. And isn't that our task as well?

"Wake up" he says. "Look around and see what God is doing in the world. And then you join in and do it too." We are not called to be subtle and secretive about our faith. We are called to live our faith out loud. And that faith is based on this: *Love God and love your neighbor as yourself*. It is that simple and that difficult.

Love is the essence of discipleship. It is the basis for transformation. It involves all that we are and all that we do, individually and as a faith community, every single day. God

broke into our world and brought us light in the life of Jesus. It is time for us to live in that light.

The brokenness of the world- rampant injustice, raging racism, vast inequalities, epidemic greed, and deadly division- cannot stand against the love of Christ. The power of love is stronger than the power of hatred. Even though we may be stumbling around in the deep darkness of a moonless night- God promises that the dawn is coming.

Remember that Easter happened early in the morning of a new day. Mary walked to the tomb in the dark of night and when she left the sun was shining brighter than she had ever seen it shine. We are children of **that** light; the light of the Risen Christ. The light of God.

I experienced a reminder of that light this week. Hope Presbyterian Church in Wheaton is a predominantly white congregation which shares its building with a predominantly black congregation, Bethel New Life Church. In August a "Black Lives Matter" sign in the church yard was stolen. They recently erected large, wooden signs on their church property- sunk in to concrete, One sign reads:

"Matter is the minimum  
Black lives are worthy  
Black lives are beloved  
Black lives are needed"

They also had a large sign bearing the name of Jacob Blake, the black man murdered by Kenosha police.

Monday night vandals busted up the signs and set fire to the church sign. Thursday evening Kathy Gingrich and I attended a prayer vigil on the lawn of Hope Church with several hundred others. We were a diverse group that included black, brown, and white Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs.

It was an act of defiant hope in the face of racism and hatred where words of forgiveness and unity were spoken. It was a light in the darkness, a reminder that God's people are doing their part to bring about transformation. It was balm for my weary soul. I have no doubt that the people of Hope Presbyterian and Bethel New Life Church are rebuilding their signs and they will keep rebuilding them as many times as it takes. They are awake, welcoming the dawning light of God.

I have long admired the late John Lewis for his deep faith and his undying belief that our country can be better. He was the child of poor sharecroppers in the deep south, a young leader of the Civil Rights Movement and a Congressman.

In his 2012 book, *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE*, he wrote, *"Thus our purpose, while we are here, in the most basic sense, is to be a light that shines- to fully express our gifts so that others might see. When they witness our splendor, when we show them it is possible to shine radiantly even in the darkest night, they begin to remember that they are stars also, meant to light up the world. We can be way-show-ers, light-bearers, and mentors of the light who encourage others to flourish, create, manifest, and glow. As each person turns on the illumination of the spirit, revealing gifts, talents, and visions for the future, we can blend our majesty in a glorious concert of communion. We can burn as one unified sun that can light up our world and even our universe. This planet can smolder with imagination, burn with creativity, reverberate with love, oneness, and peace. The infinite is possible, but this beauty can only manifest through us."* (2)

I have often wondered how Congressman Lewis remained faithful. How did he persist in nonviolent resistance even when he was beaten, even when he was arrested, even when he was left for dead on the Edmund Pettis bridge? How did he get up every morning, read the headlines, and still maintain his faith in God? How did he stand before the Congress of the United States year after year and call his colleagues to a higher purpose?

I think it was because he trusted in the transforming light of God. He wrote, *"You may be in your darkest hour, it may be darker than ten thousand nights on your path to lasting change, but there is something in you that keeps you moving, feeling your way through the night until you can see a glimmer of light. That is the power of faith."* (2)

Here is a man who lived through some of the worst things a person could experience; a man who was told over and over again that he was not worthy, not a full human being, not valued. He wrote:

*"As a disenfranchised citizen who yearned for change, as a child born on the dark side of the American dream, I heard the whispers of the spirit calling me to wrestle with the soul of a nation.*

*I could see a higher vision of what this nation could be, and I can say to every leader who might be entangled in the web of the status quo that when the people are ready, this nation will change.*

*Whenever the people finally reject the efforts to fragment their collective energies into warring factions and remember their divine union with one another, when they throw off material distraction and irrelevant negativity and hear their souls speak with one voice, **they will rise up**. And whatever is in their path will either transform or transpire."* (3)

My brothers and sisters, I hope that moment is now. I hope now is the moment for good people to rise up and say, "Enough! Enough death. Enough racism. Enough division. Enough hatred!"

I hope the moment is now that we will claim our identity as followers of Christ who refuse to remain silent in the face of evil.

I hope the moment is now that we will indeed live as children of the light.

I want to leave you with a story someone shared at the Hope Church vigil. A woman rented a house for her family in a white neighborhood. Since she transacted the deal over the phone the landlord did not know she was a black woman. On the day her family moved into the house the white neighbors began to gather and complain about the arrival of a black family. Someone called the landlord. He was so angry that the woman didn't tell him she was black, that he called the electric company and told them to turn off the power to the house. He was certain that would drive them out.

Later that evening he smugly drove into the neighborhood so he could see for himself that his plan had worked. But when he arrived at the house, he saw that all the lights were blazing. Confused, he knocked on the door and confronted the woman who told him, "You can turn off my power, but you can never turn off my light."

May it be so, my friends. May we be woke!

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE, John Lewis. Hachette Books. 2012. P.7.*
- *Lewis, p. 39.*
- *Lewis, p. 171.*