

A couple of months ago, my granddaughter was born, a joyous occasion for the entire family, but there was a catch. She was born 7 weeks prematurely, and as soon as she popped out, she was whisked away to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) for some special attention. Babies at that age can struggle with their breathing, and most are unable to nurse. My son, who was the proud Dad, and I watched the nurses huddle over the little girl, poking and prodding and fussing with wires and tubes. Soon she was settled in her bassinet, which looked more like a space capsule than a crib, with sensors measuring everything from heart beat to the temperature of her bed. One of the sensors suddenly beeped loudly and my son and I looked at each other worriedly. One of the nurses sauntered over, flicked off the alarm, and seeing our faces, smiled and said, “Not all alarms are equal. If you don’t see us jump, then relax!” Clearly the nurse knew what to listen for, and a part of her brain was constantly aware of every little beep and noise in that big room. She was watchful and alert, and I thanked God she was there.

Jesus tells us today to be watchful and alert for the signs of change, for the arrival of the lord of the house. You can be excused for wondering what the heck that means. Obviously, he doesn’t mean to literally stay awake at all times – heck, I collapse at 10 PM every night. So clearly there’s a deeper meaning to wakefulness here, a spiritual dimension, which Jesus is calling us to. In the Hindu tradition, the term used for being spiritually awake is *mindfulness*. Many Christian writers use the term *awareness*. What does this look like?

I’ve often said that the spiritual journey is a journey into awareness, a gradual dawning that the world is not simply what appears on the surface. There are a number of aha moments along the way that mark this awareness – let me touch on the most important. The first is the understanding that God is not a separate being, something or someone “out there”. Even though we spend most of our waking lives making distinctions and sorting things into proper categories, this is a pointless exercise when describing God. As Bishop Barron describes it – we can’t say that we are here and God is over there. We can’t even say that God is the biggest thing around. We can’t say that God is any particular being. You see, God is *being* itself. Everything we sense is God, because God is everything. Trying to prove that God exists is like a fish trying to prove the existence of water. God is.

The second awareness step, once you accept that God is being itself, is the recognition that God is communicating with us, or better put, is *attempting*

to communicate with us. Many of us find this ironic because we spend most of our time attempting to communicate with God as well. We call it prayer, but let's be honest. Most of our prayers are requests. Oh yes, we'll throw in a few praise words now and then so that we appear humble, but deep down inside, we want God to get cracking and grant us a few favors. So, how is that working out for you? Are your requests being granted? Yes? Not really? Rarely? God is like a good parent, advising us and coaching us along, and we are the stubborn children who have to find out for ourselves. Right? God is always communicating with us, but we don't listen very well.

The third awareness step is the shocking realization that God cares very much about you personally. This can be hard for many of us to believe. But it is a critical step. You may believe in God, you may agree that God is communicating, but if that communication is seen as generic or just a bunch of rules, then it's easy to gloss over. Yeah, yeah, yeah, there are those commandments again. Thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not do that. So answer this. Have you ever heard God call you by name? (repeat) That is the heart of this stage of awareness. God wants to talk to *you* because you are very important to God. Yes, you! There's nothing more frustrating to God than to have His declaration of love for us responded to with a shrug.

There's one more awareness step that is important to recognize, perhaps the most important of all. God wants to use you! With your permission, of course. As God tells the prophet Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jer 29:11)

What does this have to do with staying awake? Simple. If you see God in all, if you listen to God, if you rest in God's love, and if you are cooperating with God as best you can, then you are fully awake. You see God moving in other people. You see God in world events. You see God in tragedy and triumph. You see God in hurricanes and in sunsets. You walk into a room and you immediately sense who is hurting and who is happy. You find yourself acting like a loving parent to people who you don't even know. You find yourself encouraging people who are lost in the lies of this world, who think that this is all there is, who have never heard God call them by name because they're too busy thinking about money and revenge and sexual conquest and getting more stuff for themselves. It's a tragedy of epic proportions. They are asleep.

What does this have to do with Advent? Great question! It has everything to do with Advent, because the nature of Advent is to test our wakefulness to its fullest extent. If we're asleep, all we'll see is shopping and gifts and food and more than a little chaos. It will be an exhausting season. If we're awake, however, look at what we see:

- A young pregnant girl, glowing with life, hopeful and fearful. Any new mother can relate to that feeling, yes? But this girl trusts God without hesitation, an amazing model for us.
- A man in confusion, wondering how his fiancée could do this to him, and yet, he has these angelic dreams that nudge a different response. Can God be trusted?
- A crazy man in the desert yelling repent! Something big is coming. Can you feel it?
- A baby in a manger. Do you see a King? Do you see a Savior?

If you're awake, you will!

And oh by the way, little Elisha is a thriving 2 month old, thanks to those caring nurses and your prayers!