JESUS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

Has it ever happened to you that you have been driving down the road in your car and you stop, let’s say, at a stop sign or a stoplight and it dawns on you that you have no recollection of the driving you did the last mile or two? Has that ever happened to you?

Has it ever happened to you that you are in a conversation with someone face to face, your eyes and ears are opened and you are looking straight at the person who is talking to you, and you are not hearing a word the person is saying? Has that ever happened to you? Many husbands have just gotten an elbow in their ribs from their wives.

Has it ever happened to you that you have been reading a book, reading it word for word, and when you get to the bottom of the page you realize that you have no idea what you just read. And it’s not that it was hard to understand, it’s that you were not paying attention to what you were reading. Has that ever happened to you?
It’s amazing, isn’t it? It is one of the mysteries of being a human being, I think, that we can be physically present in moments and places, we can be activating our acute senses in moments and places, we can be seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and yet not perceiving.

I’ve mentioned before that we have a dog. A West Highland White Terrier whose pointy ears pick up every single sound no matter how loud or how quiet. Her moist, black nose smells things that I can’t smell if I was two inches away from it. And she is prompt to notify us of all those things going on around her. Nothing passes by her senses.

Me? I swear sometimes a freight train could be going by me and I wouldn’t know it.

Of course we could point the finger at all sorts of things that may lie at the root of our distracted spirits. Preoccupation is one thing. To be human is, I think, to be preoccupied. The human brain has this capacity to think about a lot of things at the same time, and often those things we are thinking about just happen to have nothing to do with the moment, the place or the person at hand. Worry is another thing that lies at the heart of our distracted spirits. We imagine all the things that could go wrong or have gone wrong and our insatiable desire to control things forces us to ponder things far beyond our control. Busyness, of course, is another contributing factor to our distracted spirits. The more we have in our sights the harder it is to maintain focus on just one thing. Sometimes I feel like my life is one of those video games
where aliens or enemy forces are coming at you one right after the other and you have to keep looking for the next one and meanwhile you don’t see the person who’s standing there right in front of you. Technology, of course, is yet another thing that piles onto the pile of our distracted spirits. Email, cell phones, Blackberries, twitter, radio, TV – just a few days ago I caught myself not paying attention while driving because I was trying to see what the SUV next to me was watching on TV!!! Are we nuts or what? Think of everything you are doing while driving 75 miles an hour. Radio, TV, cell phone, makeup application, books on tape, refereeing the fight between your children, sipping your 255 degree cup of coffee all while driving 75 miles an hour. Hello?!!! Does this describe your life?

So I don’t know about you but it is with an enormous amount of gratitude that I receive this morning Jesus’ Advent words – *Be aware, keep alert, stay awake. Be aware, keep alert and stay awake.*

Those sound like signs on a highway, don’t they? Now I confess that when I see those signs on the highway they simply serve to remind me that maybe what I should do is at the next stop pull off and buy myself the biggest cup of coffee they’ve got. This is my strategy for being aware, keeping alert and staying awake.
But I don’t think that’s what Jesus had in mind. He may have known Starbucks was coming, but I’m not sure he thought it was a good thing.

So what then is Jesus trying to say when he tells us to be aware, keep alert and stay awake?

First of all, of course, Jesus is telling us to pay attention to the signs of his coming. To the signs of his great and ultimate second coming; the cosmic signs, the historical signs, the spiritual signs of that day when the world will end and Jesus will return. Of course, in the same breath Jesus tells us that we can never predict when that time will occur because it is not within our power to do so with authority and accuracy, so don’t bother trying. We are to simply pay attention to what’s going on around us and realize that the time could be soon.

But it is this paying attention that we need to pay attention to. Because it is not simply that last day about which we have to pay attention. Jesus, it seems, is concerned about this day. There is so much that happens to us this day. So much breezes past us this day. And the truth is Jesus is arriving not just on the last day but on this day. Remember a couple weeks ago when he told us that he would be showing up in the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the prisoner? Jesus shows up this day. It’s not the only way he shows up. He’s showing up all the time. In the beauty of creation, in the words of scripture, in the laugh between friends, in the
tears upon our cheeks, in the thoughts of the saints, in the chance encounters between strangers, in the unexpected phone call or in the surprise diagnosis. Jesus is coming not just on the last day, but on this day.

Be aware, Jesus says, keep alert … stay awake.

Now I don’t know about you but it is often for me that I don’t know that Jesus has appeared until after it’s over. That’s so often the way it happens. We have an encounter with Christ but we don’t quite realize we are having an encounter with Christ until the moment has passed. And then it dawns on us maybe, just maybe that was Jesus I just met? We see Christ but only in the rearview mirror.

Maybe though, that’s the way it’s supposed to happen.

A dear friend of mine died a few weeks ago. He died far too young – he was around my age, so that means far too young – four kids and a wonderful wife he left behind. He gave me the privilege of walking with him as he navigated a long road with cancer. And he taught me many things about living and dying. I was invited to do his funeral. There was so much to be sad about. So much to question and to be angry about in this premature death. But when the sanctuary filled and his children and family spoke of their love and their respect and their
admiration and their learning and their assurance that soon they would see their dad again – when I walked away from that and looked in the rearview mirror – I saw that Jesus had been there. He had been there all along.

Five years ago I stood in the living room of a Presbyterian elder. She lived in Pearlington, Mississippi. Pearlington, Mississippi is where the Pearl River meets the Gulf of Mexico. Pearlington is about 5 miles west of where the eye of Katrina made landfall. The center of this woman’s living room was gone. We were standing on the edges of what remained. And she asked if I would pray for her. And after I prayed we emptied a truck of supplies onto her porch that would get her through the next couple weeks. And as we prepared to leave she said, “Thank you. You have no idea how grateful I am for your visit. I can’t wait until I get the chance to do this for someone else.”

“Thank you?” I thought. “You’re thinking of “thank you” with your living room having floated out to sea?”

It wasn’t until I got on the plane later that night and took off from the runway that I looked in the rearview mirror and saw Jesus.
When I was a wet-behind-the-ears seminarian serving as an intern in a church up in Michigan and got my chance to preach I was excited. I worked hard on my sermon. Too hard. But when I finished writing it I thought I had a masterpiece. So I was excited at that first service to give them what I got. And so I preached – and after about four minutes of preaching I realized that these folks had no idea what I was talking about. Confusion covered their faces. And then things got worse. By the end … those that weren’t studying their bulletins were fast asleep. After greeting at the door and hearing the compassionate lies of good meaning people telling me that that was “some sermon” – I went into my office and closed the door and began wondering what my career options were. I sat down at my desk and prayed, “Dear God … what have I done? I worked so hard. I gave it my best. I’m not your guy. After a few more laments I finally ended by saying, “I’m out of answers. You got to help me.” So I opened my eyes and there was nothing. Nothing. I went to my sermon … make a couple of little changes – enough to put perfume on a pig. And then I went out to the next service. I preached again. And something was different. Something had changed. Only five people were sleeping. Bulletins stayed in their racks. And the comments at the door included, “That sermon really spoke to me.” “How did you know?” “Can I have a copy?” It didn’t dawn on me until later – when I looked in the rearview mirror – that none of it was because of me. Jesus had shown up.

I wonder if that isn’t the way if often happens. That when Jesus calls us to be aware, keep alert and stay awake, that most of what he’s calling us to do is at the very least look in the
rearview mirror. Life does come at us fast and life does breeze past quickly and yes, we do have the pedal to the metal far more so than what is healthy or safe. And we live in mortal danger of not only being unprepared for Jesus’ grand and glorious coming at the last day but being unprepared for Jesus coming today. This day.

But maybe this week has taught us something. Because chances are this past week, or specifically this past Thursday, maybe you found that moment when you bowed your head and peeked into the rearview mirror. Maybe you took those precious seconds or minutes and you looked back and you saw glimpses of Jesus in your life and you gave thanks. And maybe just maybe that prepared you to expect him to appear sometime in the days ahead. And if you did take that chance on Thursday then you know how little effort it takes. What little effort it takes just to glimpse for a moment into the rearview mirror and to see Jesus. Oh yes, I know it means taking your foot a little bit off the accelerator. I know it means even sometimes pulling off onto the side of the road. But every time we do and we see Jesus behind us it might help us to expect him to appear in front of us.

You know the miracle of Christmas was the people who saw Jesus in front of them. It wasn’t the only miracle but it sure was a big one. The shepherds saw Jesus in front of them. The wise men saw Jesus in front of them. John the Baptist saw Jesus in front of him. Even bad old King Herod saw Jesus in front of him. Joseph and Mary saw Jesus in front of them. And
maybe that’s why we are told more than once, when all these Advent things were occurring, we are told more than once that Mary pondered all these things in her heart. She wasn’t going to let a day go by without looking in the rearview mirror to see if she could see the Messiah.

Now I know most of you well enough to know that you are preparing to go through Advent at warp speed. I know Advent for most of us is a contest for who can get to December 25th the most exhausted. But I also know that when you are driving at warp speed and falling asleep at the wheel you see little around you and you see nothing behind you. And the chances of crashing are high.

*Be aware, keep alert, stay awake.*

Take a look. There is someone in your rearview mirror. It’s the same one who’s right there in front of you.