

Could You Not Stay Woke?
Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Wil Gafney, PhD.

Jesus said, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; you all stay here, and stay awake..." Mark 14:34

Let us pray: *Holy One of Old, open our eyes. Amen.*

"Could you not stay awake one hour?" Mark 14:37

Could you not stay woke?

Billie Holiday was designated the most dangerous person in America because she would not stop singing "Strange Fruit."

*Southern trees bear strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
 Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees*

Lady Day, our gardenia scented blues prophet, would not silence her prophetic cry against a white supremacist government that endorsed terror tactics to murder the civil rights movement and our leaders, of which she was one.

The government's full throated defense of lynching and those who lynched — including pastors and politicians — manifested itself as an FBI initiative to seduce Billie Holiday back into the heroin needle from which she had freed herself, drive her to madness and bankruptcy and, many believe, deprive her of proper and prompt medical attention in her last days to hasten her demise. But the words of a prophet do not die with the prophet. Her words survived.

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
 Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh*

Billie Holiday, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, Jr., Malcom X and Angela Davis were each identified as one of if not the most dangerous person in America by that same FBI and they did not all survive the infiltrators and assassins the FBI sent against them. But their words survived.

Each one of them challenged the legitimacy of a white supremacist oligarchy disguised as a western democracy built on the backs of stolen black folk and stolen black labor and stolen black wealth. Each of these persons, prophets, preachers, poets, protesters and professors saw the world as it was beneath the surface where power and wealth and privilege and bias are the only seats at the table that matter. Some might say their third eye was open. They were awake to the realities of this world as if they had taken the red pill and suddenly seen the world without its white washing matrix painting a picture of nothing to see here, Jedi mind trick. They were awake. And call us to wakefulness but we keep slipping and sleeping. Because wakefulness is hard.

Wakefulness is terrifying. To be awake, to be woke, means to see and live nightmares day and night. It means to see the world as it is, #NoFilter. It means to see that we will not soon be done with the trouble of the world, no, not soon enough. It means there's no rest for the weary. It means that often there is no peace but the peace of death. And so we sleep. But as Fiddy Cent's character, Kanan Stark, said, "sleep is the cousin of death." We are sleeping ourselves to death. And the forces of empire that profit off of our lives and our deaths are playing the lullaby. Could you not stay awake one hour? Could you not stay woke?

In the summer of fire, 2014, black men and boys were being shot and strangled and suffocated by police departments across the country in a cascade of violence. As a result many are able to call the names of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. But the police also executed Yvette Smith and Tyree Woodson, Shonda Mikelson and Dawn Cameron, Aura Rosser and Akai Gurley and, Tamir Rice and Victor White and Ariel Levy all in the same year. And when the Black Lives Matter movement erupted into public view, a black cultural folk expression began to be heard beyond the cultural curtain that protects black stuff, black speech and black space. Stay woke. Stay awake. Could you not stay awake one hour?

But folk did not stay awake. If you woke up when Tyre Nichols was chased down and hunted for sport in the street like an animal, you woke up because you were sleeping on police violence against black and brown folk when it wasn't in the news every day. Could you not stay awake one hour? Could you not stay woke one hour? The people saying the Black Lives Matter movement is "over" want you to go back to sleep. When defund the police was deemed to be too woke, a lot of folk did go back to sleep. Folk were woke when it was cool but silent when the term was co-opted and bastardized and became the newest way to say the N-word. Folk with tattered black lives matter signs in their front yard making cringe woke jokes. Could you not stay awake one hour? Could you not stay woke one hour? I see you slipping and sleeping. And I see you sleepwalking through protests on your way back to bed. And I just came by to tell you stay woke.

You see, there was a mama's boy from Nazareth and folk slept on him too. [Some folk are still sleeping.] They called him Jesus, Yeshua, Mary's baby and Joseph's maybe, calling him fatherless by calling him the son of Mary. But they also called him a healer and a miracle worker. They called him a magician and they called him a sorcerer. They called him lord and master and teacher and rabbi. They called him Messiah, the Christ of God, the King of Israel and

the Son of the living God. They called him a threat to the empire and to Caesar's claim of godhood. They called him a threat to Herod's throne. They called him Jesus, a mama's boy from Nazareth.

They called him soft on crime like adultery. They called him a socialist for the redistribution of wealth – fishes and loaves, coats and cloaks. They called him a womanizer with lowbrow taste in even lower women. They called him a glutton and a drunk, and not just guilty by association. They called him a thug who ran with thugs, some of his boys were quick to cut you and have you leaving with fewer parts than you came with, but he could fix that up too. They called him ignorant – six days a week you can heal folk but since you obviously don't know how sabbath works let me tell you why can't do any healing up in here on today. They called him the one the devil couldn't deceive or seduce. They called him out his name while he was calling folk out their graves. They called him everything but a child of God. But they also called him by David's name; they called him Jesus, the Son of David. I call him the Son of Bathsheba.

There was a mama's boy from Nazareth who came into town like the son of Bathsheba and not like the son of David. Jesus rolled into town like his mama's son, like his many times over great grandmother Bathsheba's boy. He came without a chariot and without a crown. He came without an army and he came without a sword. He came without a record of atrocity and he came without a treasury. He came without a red carpet and he came without a body man. He came without whispers of sexual misconduct. He came on third class transportation. But he came woke.

Jesus came into town with his third eye open to the terror and torture that awaited him. He was awake to sin and suffering. He was awake to love and loss. He was awake to belonging and betrayal. He was awake to faithfulness and faithlessness. He was awake to finite mortality and infinite mystery. Jesus was fully awake and he asked for those who followed him, who loved him, who served him and served with him to stay awake with him. The crowds and applause were gone. It was just them watching a man who was more than a man pray a prayer yielding to a death that terrified them.

Jesus said, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; you all stay here, and stay awake... Could you not stay awake one hour?"

Could you not stay woke?

Those boys who said they were his ride and die choose not to see his sorrow and struggle. They chose not to bear witness to this terribly intimate moment. They let sleep take them so they wouldn't have to see the world as it is. They didn't stay awake. They didn't stay woke.

But Jesus, Mary's baby boy with the grandiose claims about a God and father who were one and the same, stayed awake. He stayed awake to wrestle with God while it would've been easier to curl up and have a last few minutes of sleep. He stayed awake to betrayal by one of his closest friends. He stayed awake through the helter skelter choreography of an unjust legal

system. He stayed awake through police brutality and battery. He stayed awake through his body's pain and his mama's tears. He stayed awake. He stayed woke. Jesus didn't close his eyes to the evil that men do not even when they were doing it to him. He didn't close his eyes to financial or political corruption. He didn't close his eyes to the atrocities an occupying force commits against a subject population. He didn't close his eyes or his ears or his heart to the potential for repentance and reconciliation even as he hung up on the cross. And when he did close his eyes in Lady Death's cousin, Sleep, it would only be for a moment or two or three. But not yet.

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter cr—*

This week some of us will reenact the long days and nights in which Jesus stayed awake. But that ritual liturgical reenactment has no meaning if we are asleep to the world around us and its needs. Jesus is still calling us to stay awake and stay woke. Stay woke to history or we shall surely repeat it. Stay woke in the midst of seemingly overwhelming odds to fight against anti-trans laws and fight for gun safety laws. Stay woke to brazen fascism in Europe and Canada and right here at home in America with the three K's. Stay woke to the white supremacist domestic terrorist threat at every level of our society, culture, legal and justice systems. Stay woke to antisemitism and its roots in Christianity and in some of our continuing and current theologies. Stay woke to Christian Zionism and the deployment our tax dollars, military training and equipment to maintain and expand the occupation of Palestine and the apartheid restrictions against Arab Israelis with with second class passports. Resist the urge to curl up in a puddle and go to sleep. But if you do close your eyes, black folks say, "every closed ain't sleep." When you close your eyes this week, close them in prayer. Not the empty refrain of "thoughts and prayers." Pray the prayer of preparation and pray the prayer of participation, but never the pray the prayer of resignation.

Don't let those who have a vested interest in you sleeping shame you out of staying woke. We've already seen what happens when we fail to stay awake and stay woke. Some folks slept on a reality show buffoon with a long history of rape and racism and only woke up when he woke up in the White House. Some folks slept on the security of reproductive health care and only woke up when the cable news told them they were now living in Gilead. Some folks slept secure on access to the right to vote being secure and then woke up to a Supreme Court that said corporations were people and the states that denied access to the right to vote no longer needed monitoring. Some folks slept on judicial appointments and local elections, school boards and library collections. We can't afford to sleep anymore. We can't afford it for our children and we can't afford it for our neighbors. We can't afford it for this nation and we can't afford it for the world. Stay awake. Stay woke.

Stay awake and see all the ways God is partnering with us in these nightmares. Don't sleep on God. Don't sleep on those through whom God works. Don't sleep on disability activists. Don't

sleep on angry, sick and tired black women. Don't sleep on LGBTQIA folks who are never going back into those closets unless it's to pull out something fabulous for their next drag show. Don't sleep on children and teens creating the movements that will reform gun culture in America and move the needle on human made ecological carelessness and catastrophe. Don't sleep on the mama bears of trans children. And if you are awake, why don't you join us. There's a long day's work ahead and miles to go before we sleep.

Could you not stay awake one hour?

Could you not stay woke one hour?