

# God is Woke...More than Ever

November 8, 2020

Are you awake? That's my simple prayer to start my sermon with today: Are we woke? Make us as awake to injustice, and awake to the power of grace, as you are, Dear God. Amen.

As most of you know, I love jazz. And the idea of being "woke" comes to us, not surprisingly, from the culture of jazz—notably African American slang.

The origins are shrouded, as are those of most such terms—cool, bad (meaning "good"), dig it, cats, hip, and so forth, but the need to "stay woke" has become one of the anthems of the Black Lives Matter movement.

It refers, literally, to the need for vigilance. Stay alert! More metaphorically, it means keep your eyes open for trouble—both the kind of trouble that needs to be addressed by holding perpetrators accountable, and the kind of trouble we can get into—the good trouble of working for justice and peace and against oppression.

Jazz and soul singer Erykah Badu repeatedly sang "I stay woke" in a 2008 song, and that kind of revived the connection between being awake and advocating for social justice.

Now, given those origins to the word, it's not surprising that the term has come in for ridicule. "Oh, she's so woke she can't see her feet for the size of her self-righteous ego." "Oh, he's so woke that he can't see his privilege if it smacked him in the back of the head."

Even NPR has gotten into the game of woke-dissing (another one of those wonderful jazz-informed terms) [To diss, of course, is to disrespect, but it also refers to how a drummer can diss another player with a crash of the cymbal—diss! And you're done.]

So, here's what Sam Sanders, an African American op-ed commentator for NPR, said in a December commentary. According to Sanders, "woke" emerged along with Black Lives Matter, where it referred to being willing to work to "convince people of all races to value and respect blackness, to take issues like the deaths of Black people at the hands of police seriously. Woke became shorthand for a mindset and a worldview that values Black lives."

Sanders goes on to quote Elijah Watson, another student of Black culture: A word meant to imply a constant state of striving, course-correcting and growth has been heard now, for almost a decade, as a static and performative state of being. "[The word woke] was something that we were taking seriously and then it kind of transformed into something ironic and then it became a meme and then it became a trademark," Watson says.

He compares the co-opting of woke to the way music steeped in Black tradition moves through mainstream culture.

"We made jazz, we made rap, we made all these different things," Watson said. "It's sad to say but we're used to being taken advantage of and to have things stolen from us. But at the same time we're quick to evolve and adapt because we need to in order to survive."

Here's to evolution and adaptation. Let's promise to leave a word that's past its prime in 2018. It's time to put woke to sleep.

So, Jesus, what are you telling us when you tell us in the ancient parable that I just read: stay awake! What meaning can that have for us, today—without falling into appropriation or the parody of “wokeness.”

Here’s my suggestion: God is woke...more than ever. God is the one who values Black Lives—and so can we. God is the one who never ceases to work for justice—and so can we. God is the one who loves life so much to create it, redeem it, and sustain it—and so can we. God is woke...more than ever, because God is loving, more than ever. And I don’t know about you, but I need to hear that over, and over, and over again. God is woke. God won’t go to sleep on us. God is still working. And we have work to do, too.

In our first reading today, in the Book of Amos, the prophet condemns the people of Israel, any people, for their injustices, and threatens violence will follow. It’s rather applicable to our time, isn’t it?

Earlier in Chapter 5, the prophet encourages the people to “Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.”

A people who are violent fall victim to their own violence. That is the story told by every prophet; the story told like a red thread through history.

Similarly, The Lord, always awake, always loving, brings life. God is woke...more than ever.

The prophet goes on: “Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!” Wormwood is a bitter herb—and bringing righteousness to the ground is like dragging something beautiful through a mud puddle. So, here’s the prophet describing those who degrade public life and morality, making life bitter and grubby, back in the 6th century BCE!

In any case, it’s pretty clear things aren’t going well in the Israel of Amos. “They”—the powerful, Amos goes on “hate the one who reproves in the gate”—that is, they hate the one who holds them publicly accountable. They—the powerful, “abhor the one who speaks the truth.” Hmm. They, the powerful, “trample on the poor.” They, the powerful, “take a bribe, and push aside the needy.”

Does this sound at all familiar to you?

Whatever else we take away from these past four years and the results of our recent election which is still uncertain as I record these words, we ought to be newly awakened to the depth of the injustices in our midst. We ought to be woke.

Eight years ago, I published a book entitled “Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence.” In it, I pointed out how in U.S. history we have consistently manifested what I called “innocent domination.” That is, we’ve developed systems that exclude, marginalize, oppress, and, ultimately, sacrifice or kill people—while remaining “innocent” of how this damage has operated, at least in our own hearts and minds. I pointed in “Empire of Sacrifice” especially to how these systems worked along three fault lines: age, race, and gender. When it comes to age, we target and exclude especially the young—children and youth, and the old, our most aged—in ways

that the pandemic has made especially pointed. Those who are suffering now from COVID-19 have by and large been left alone, or in the hands of overworked and dissed healthcare workers, to do so. And children—which we claim to hold up as the most important and valued of our supposedly “pro-life” culture, in fact are rendered second-class citizens when we fail fully and equitably to fund education and family leave and women’s healthcare. Instead, we spend our trillions—the strongest economy in human history—on weapons and war-making. Since President Trump came into office, we have spent at least \$3 trillion on our military—according to American Progress magazine. Imagine what that money could do in education, or family leave, or healthcare, or sustainability initiatives.

On race—if you’re black or brown, African or Latinx or Asian, you know what I’m talking about when I talk about an Empire of Sacrifice: you know how COVID-19 has impacted those communities of front-line workers, and you know how our prison-industrial system profits from the business of housing young people in brutal lockdowns that threaten their health and life. The New Jim Crow has been brutal in its efficiency: and we cannot, should not, look away at what we now can see clearly.

And on gender—my, my, my—the progress we have made in recent years is so fragile, so subject to backlash, that many of my former students who are serving as pastors have been posting open calls on Facebook—which is also, of course, an open call here at Union: if you’re LGBTQ and want to get married before the law changes—call me! It’s come to this: families are threatened. Families! Green Bay approves and publishes an Equal Rights Ordinance just as the Supreme Court gets stacked in what is an unabashed effort to do harm to the human rights of some of our most vulnerable siblings.

So, if I take anything away from the last four years and from the recent election—it’s that the veil of innocence has been removed. The domination is no longer innocent: it is blatant and out in the open. We cannot hide any longer from the legacy and ongoing oppression at the roots of our history, and such oppression is woven into the ongoing systems of our policies and government. As Lenny Duncan, whose “Dear Church” we have been reading in Adult Education, and from whom you will hear as our preacher next Sunday, puts it: “The roots are rotten.”

As Amos sees it, we cannot claim innocence. We are guilty. And so—

*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

We have work to do.

But we also have the power to do it—given to us by a gracious God who will not let us fall asleep on the job, but who has awakened us in new ways to the kind of meaningful changes we can make in our culture, in our congregation, in our world.

Return to the status quo is not possible. The Bridegroom is coming. Everything's changing.

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And this is why Amos describes the "Day of the Lord" as difficult, as frightening—as something to fear.

Change is hard. A few weeks ago, Pastor Bridget preached in her sermon about Process Theology, which takes as its central affirmation that God is Change Itself. Think about that. Most of us have inherited a pretty static sense of God. God doesn't change—the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

But is that, then, a living God? And if God can't change, doesn't that limit God—and who are we (or, more accurately, who is Plato) to limit God to a non-changing essence. Instead, philosophers and theologians like Alfred North Whitehead, John B. Cobb, Catherine Keller, Sallie McFague, and Monica A. Coleman all suggest that God is less essence than process: change itself; perfect change, even.

Monica A. Coleman in particular is an African American womanist process theologian who emphasizes in her edited book *Creating Women's Theology* that "for the last twenty-five years, women religion scholars have synthesized process philosophy with their feminist sensibilities and faith commitments to highlight the value of experience, the importance of freedom, and the interdependence of humanity, God, and all creation."

If God is ongoing process, truly living, rather than static and unchanging, then that points us toward freedom, doesn't it! That certainly wakes me up! It points me to how God is present in, with, and under all of life: like life itself, God's is constantly evolving, growing, stretching, changing. Could it be otherwise?

Can God be other than the most perfectly related; the most completely interdependent Being? Can God not feel? Can God not LOVE? If God is WOKE, then God feels. God cares. God loves.

Process theology is really helpful for us in times of change and uncertainty, suggesting that, like nature itself, God is going through this with us. And this isn't to limit God's power—not at all. It points us, instead, to a kind of power very different than force—the power of incarnation, of taking on flesh, of participating in the processes of life, including politics, to bring them to fulfillment.

God is the MOST intimately related, the MOST intricately connected, the MOST constantly changing. God is WOKE...more than ever.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus tells us that the kin-dom of heaven, the kind of community that God gathers, is filled with people who have the capacity to prepare and to participate.

It's a wonderful story—those oil lamps are any kind of art, any kind of labor, in which we might make our living by paying attention. The older I get the more I realize that a lot of life is just showing up. God's community is like that: we have to show up, do our work, help bring the banquet to fulfillment.

And the wisdom of the story is also in recognizing that a good half of the community is simply foolish. Let me just sit right there. The Gospel writer 2,000 years ago put it quite plainly: a good 50% of the people are simply foolish.

But it's this matter of paying attention that is the heart of our gospel—the Good News of Jesus Christ. God is the one who is most perfectly attending to us, to our needs, to the world—and whose heart breaks when we do harm; whose body feels the pain when we exclude; whose mind reels when we give in to unreason. Because God is WOKE, God suffers.

And our calling is to go and do likewise. Now there's an invitation for you! Being woke means being willing to feel hurt...more than ever.

And so, yes, we have come to the cross, as we shall sing shortly: "What wondrous love is this, o my soul ... what wondrous love is this! That Christ should come in bliss to bear the heavy cross for my soul, for my soul, to bear the heavy cross, for my soul."

So, it is when we are awake to the cross that we realize how God calls us to overcome any fear we have—there is nothing, not death, not powers and principalities, not a presidential election, that can separate us from the self-giving and creative love of God.

It is when we are awake to the cross that we realize how Jesus opens up to us a new generosity, a more abundant way of living—more than ever, through our offerings and through our pledges to the life of this church.

It is when we are awake to the cross that we realize how the bridegroom's coming changes everything: what we thought was a burden becomes a pleasure; what we thought was a day of dread becomes a day of joy; what we thought was a time of waiting becomes a time of feasting; what we thought was death, becomes life.

God is woke...more than ever.

And we can be too—when we participate in the life of Union through learning to be anti-racists.

We can be too—when we raise our voices and march in protest to say that Black Lives Matter.

We can be too—when we see the beauty in creation and invite others to help us sustain it.

We can be too—when we pray, when we sing, when we teach, when we serve...more than ever.

I'm retrieving WOKE from the dustbin of what once was hip and now is passe.

Because God is WOKE...more than ever.

Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl

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**Amos 5; Matthew 25:1-13**

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