



“Awakening”
Lenten Study 2018 — Week One
 Roger Spahr, SE District Superintendent
 Dakotas Conference

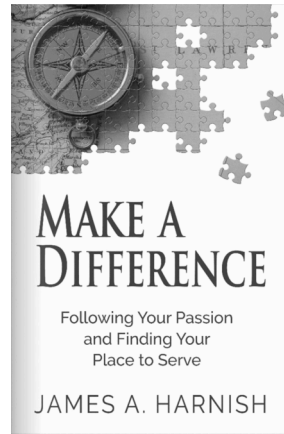
“Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”

Ephesians 5: 14 (NLT)

If you happen to be sitting next to someone who seems tired, I give you permission right now to poke them with your finger and shout, “Wake up, oh sleeper!”

They will thank you for doing that, because for the next seven minutes I want to speak to you about God’s wake up call to the Church.

I’m Roger Spahr, the Southeast District Superintendent of the Dakotas Conference. During this Lenten season You’ve been invited to be explorers of one the greatest adventure we human beings will undertake in life. To discover how God wants to use you to make a difference in this world! Jim Harnish, in his book, *Make a Difference*, says this journey begins with an awakening – a rousing from my sleep.



As a child growing up, I learned firsthand the dangers of living a drowsy life. My dad had a sleeping problem. As far as I could remember he fell asleep everywhere. He would be eating at the dinner table and his spoon would be half way to his mouth when he would nod off and the spoon would drop into his plate. Taking trips in the car was always an adventure, as we kids would sit in the back seat knowing that the difference between life and death rested in my mom’s elbow.

My favorite Christmas photos always included my dad conked out in his favorite Lazy Boy while the rest of us opened our gifts and enjoyed the holiday without him. Even in Church, I can’t remember a single sermon that my dad stayed awake for. I often wondered if our pastor felt like a failure as a preacher because of my dad’s noticeable snore each week during the sermon?

This went on for years until what I call the Great Awakening of my Dad. It was the day the doctor discovered his allergies. He was allergic to cows, pigs, corn, and oats (pretty much everything on the farm). The moment he changed his environment he woke up. He began to experience a fullness of the life that he had missed for over 40 years.

Not all of us will experience that kind of awakening physically, but spiritual slumber is even more tragic. We are immersed in a fallen world, born with clouded minds, and the effect on all our souls is a spiritual deadness and lethargy. Like my dad, we can live with it so long we assume this is normal! But God’s grace never gives up on awakening sleepers.

Some of you listening will immediately identify with what I am about to say. For some of you, your awakening was like an alarm clock going off! You still remember the day and the hour, maybe even the minute that you woke up and you saw the world and yourself through the eyes of God for the first time. It was a Road to Damascus awakening.

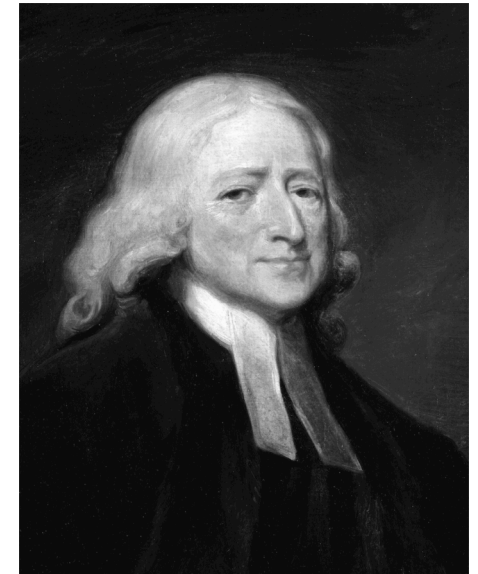
For others, it was a little slower. It was more like a gradual waking up from a deep sleep. God had to shake you and throw water in your face, snap your C-Pap and pull off your covers. The result was the same. You woke up! John Wesley taught that it was the grace of God working in our life that initiates this awakening. We cannot wake ourselves from our sleep.

I came across an article in Christianity Today a while back from a pastor in Chicago named David Ferguson. It was titled “5 Stages of Awakening”. Ferguson had personally observed thousands of people awoken in their experience of God and he saw a pattern of how God works. As I was reading the article I kept thinking this seems so familiar, and then I realized the stages of spiritual awaking that Ferguson is describing, mirrored John Wesley’s three stages of Grace.

In case you don’t know what those three stages of Grace are, poke your sleepy neighbor one more time because you don’t want him or her to miss this, because this “Amazing Grace” is at the heart of who we are as Methodists!

John Wesley taught that the first over arching type of Grace Is what he called **“Prevenient Grace”** - prevenient means to precede. Because God loves every person in this fallen world and desires all to be saved, God has poured out on humanity a covering of grace that allows any sinful human beings to sense the initial promptings of God’s love for them. It would be impossible for us to love God if God didn’t love us first.

Ferguson’s first two stages of awakening fit into this “Prevenient Grace.” Here they are:



- I. The first awakening is an **Awakening to Longing**. This is the universal feeling people have that “there’s got to be more” to life than what I’m experiencing. The longing for love, purpose, and meaning.
- II. The second awakening is the **Awakening to Regret**. We tend to pursue those three longings without God. When we do we find ourselves alone, directionless, and confused.

It is possible to spend years, even our entire life, cycling through these first two stages. Ferguson calls it the “Sorry Cycle”. We know there must be more, but we keep looking for the answers apart from a relationship with God. It’s a life filled with regrets, but never waking up to the truths of God.

John Wesley’s second step of Grace is what he calls “**Saving Grace**.” This grace is experience when any person responds by faith and embraces the work of Jesus Christ in forgiving our past and offering us life.

Ferguson’s next two “Stages of Awaken” are the awakening to this Saving Grace!

- III. The third awakening is the **Awakening to Help**. After repeating the “sorry cycle” of trying to fulfill these longings without God, we come to the end of ourselves and say, “I can’t do this on my own.”
- IV. And then comes the **Awakening to Love**. In this stage, we come to the realization that Jesus is the one who leads us back to God. As we come back to God, we are ambushed by grace. We discover “God, loves me deeply after all!”

The Saving Grace of God wakes us up to our identity of being a Child of God. It’s the Prodigal Child returning home after coming to his or her senses.

These two awakenings usher us into a relationship with God as we begin to learn what it means to be in God’s Family. Wesley calls this the “First Work of Grace.” One of the greatest joys in the Church is to see friends and family wake up to “Saving Grace” and experience the embrace of God welcoming them home. But Wesley says there is one more work of grace. There is still another awakening that needs to happen in our life. Wesley calls it “**Sanctifying Grace**” – it is the grace to grow more and more like Jesus by being perfected in our love for God and people.



- V. Ferguson calls this last awakening: the **Awakening to Life**. To awaken to life is what it means to walk with God. To allow God to speak to us, guide us, and use our lives daily. This is the awakening we will be talking about for the rest of these Lenten

messages. The fact that you are watching this video tells me that God is trying to get your attention at this very moment to awaken you to life, because, the reality is, even followers of Jesus get sleepy.

So, God uses many methods to wake up the sleeping Saints of the Church. God uses worship, scripture, prayer and fasting, acts of kindness, generosity, other people and experiences to stir us awake.

Just a few days ago I was watching the evening news and these pictures flashed across the screen – starving kids in Yemen. I remember feeling the Spirit of God shaking my soul, awakening me to my far too limited awareness of God’s heart. I don’t know about you, but it seems that the older I get the more I need the elbow of God nudging me. It’s so easy to fall asleep to love, isn’t it?

I seldom snore through sermons. Mostly because it’s embarrassing to fall asleep while you’re preaching... but I do fear missing out on the movements of God around me because I was spiritually unaware.

What is God doing to shake you from your sleep? “*Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light.*” Ephesians 5: 14

Would you pray with me?

“Gracious God, thank you for your love that will not give up shaking, prodding, and rousing us from our spiritual drowsiness.

Awaken your church once again.

Give us alert hearts to your activity that is unfolding around us every day.

We don’t want to get to the end of our life and discover we missed out on your abundant life and purpose.

Stir us from our sleep!

Fill us with urgency and energy for the things that are eternal.

In Christ we ask this. Amen.”

