

Woke  
August 6, 2023: The Transfiguration  
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



*Oh Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.*

If it feels like *déjà vu* all over again listening to this morning's readings, you are not imagining things. We heard similar lections on February 19, the last Sunday after the Epiphany. Those readings were also keyed to the mountain top Transfiguration of Jesus, traditionally highlighted on the last Sunday after the Epiphany, which prepares us to begin Lent.

I don't know how long the Transfiguration has been featured on the last Sunday before Lent. But I have learned that August 6, 1456, was the day that the news of the defeat of the Ottoman Turks by Christian armies in Belgrade reached the ears of Pope Callixtus III in Rome. In thanksgiving to the God of his understanding, the Pope declared August 6 to be the Feast of the Transfiguration throughout the Western Church.<sup>1</sup> As Anglicans, we inherited this tradition. And this year, August 6 falls on Sunday. A bit of church history this morning.

I studied and prayed about this morning's passage from Luke; compared it with Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, that we heard in February; and put it side by side with Mark's account.

Only Luke notes that Peter, James, and John struggle to stay awake. On the one hand, it's hard to believe anyone could fall asleep at such a thunderous moment. On the other hand, I know from my own experience that when we are feeling overwhelmed, falling asleep is exactly what we want to do.

In any case, Luke makes the point that *because* Peter, James and John were *awake*, they experienced the Glory of God in the face of Jesus (and got to see Moses and Elijah to boot.)

Now, it turns out that being "awake" or "alert," translated from several Greek words, is a necessary state of being in Scripture, if we want to be faithful. These words appear dozens of times, both in the Christian and Jewish Scriptures.

The word "awake" in Luke this morning is rendered from the Greek word *diagregoreo*, whose root is *gregoreo*. It means to watch, to give strict attention to, to be cautious, to be active, to take heed lest through indolence, some destructive calamity suddenly overtakes us.<sup>2</sup>

Here is a small sample of its usage elsewhere in the New Testament:

Jesus warns the disciples to "keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." (Mt. 24.42-42) In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus implores his friends to stay awake with him. (Mk. 14.37) In the Book of Acts, Paul tells his people, "To be alert to those wolves" who would disrupt the community. (Acts 20.31) He warns the Corinthians "to be alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast\\_of\\_the\\_Transfiguration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast_of_the_Transfiguration)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/gregoreuo.html>

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be strong.” (1 Corinthians 16.13) He cautions the Church in Thessalonica “Not [to] sleep as others do but be alert and sober,” (1 Thessalonians 5.6) so as to be ready when Jesus comes.

If Scripture is to be trusted, it seems like being awake, alert, “woke” if you will, is a good thing, a necessary thing, if we are to be faithful to Jesus. In Scriptural terms, it means being exquisitely attuned to the presence of Christ wherever we are.

The contemporary use of the word “woke” originates nearly a century ago, in the Black community. An early documented instance comes from the late 1930s, in a recording by Huddie Ledbetter, the iconic singer of the blues better known as Lead Belly.

He sings a protest song in defense of the Scottsboro Boys, Black teens famously and falsely accused and convicted of raping two white woman in Alabama. At the recording’s end, Lead Belly warns, “I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through Alabama - stay woke, keep their eyes open.”<sup>3</sup> He uses “stay woke” in explicit association with Black Americans’ need to be aware of racially motivated threats and the potential dangers of white America.<sup>4</sup> It continues to have that association, among others.

As I go on, I simplify greatly and compress decades of usage and cultural discussion. Forgive me. But at the moment, at its worst, “woke” has been trivialized into a mean-spirited insult from the right. It demeans those who suffer and have suffered from systematic harm in our history. On the left, at its worst, “woke” has devolved into a performative and superficial badge of progressive ideology, absent any real action for substantive justice for those who need it.

I wonder if we can recover and repurpose “woke” as a Biblical call to discipleship, rather than a secular ideology weaponized in the service of a merely political or cultural agenda.

As followers of Jesus, we are to be awake to his work and his voice in the world. We are to be alert to discerning him in the ordinary places and events of our lives. We are to be “woke” to opportunities to serve. When we are “woke” to what Jesus says and wake up to what is going on around us, and within us, we will see the Glory of God in our everyday surroundings. We will be moved out of our comfort zones into making a difference.

When we are alert to the words and example of Jesus, we will not demonize our neighbors with whom we disagree. We will be alert to racial and other kinds of discrimination that are both personal and baked into systems and institutions. We will be awake to privileges we may have that we can use to serve others. We will be “woke” to the ways we can protect and nurture rather than harm God’s glorious creation. We will be “woke” to the pain that we and others carry that may be masked by bluster and deflection.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/19/1188543449/what-does-the-word-woke-really-mean-and-where-does-it-come-from>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-wokeness-history-origin-evolution-controversy>

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We aren't always going to get it right. We need to forgive one another and ourselves for that. Peter himself initially misses the point in the Gospel text today and tries to freeze that moment in time, rather than head back down the mountain strengthened to continue his discipleship. **When we are “woke” to Jesus, we listen to his voice, and we do his work in the world.**

**Amen.**