

## **On Watching and Waiting**

*Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36*

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*First Sunday of Advent*

Our gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Advent and (our first Sunday together as pastor and people) happens to be one of the more troubling and controversial passages found in the whole of the gospel record. No one here today would likely call these a favorite portion of scripture. It is part of what is called the Synoptic Apocalypse which begins at verse 5. Similar but different versions are found in the other synoptics in Mark 13 and Matthew 24.

If I had to choose a text for today's message it would probably be Mark 13:33: "Beware, keep alert; (Some versions say 'Take, heed, watch!') for you do not know when the time will come."

Why such a selection on this first Sunday of Advent or this fourth Sunday before Christmas as some might prefer to think of it. Well this passage, and indeed this Advent season itself, force us to reflect upon the end of our days, the end of all days, and the promised return of our Lord —his second Advent, or second coming if you will. I say forces us because quite frankly we would prefer not to think about these matters. Like those who want to get to the empty tomb without ever going by the Cross of Calvary, or get to the Easter without ever enduring the rigors and the disciplines of Lent, many Christians are not overly fond of Advent and are ready to sing joyous carols of Christmas having never sung the haunting and solemn dirges of Advent. But in the inevitable rhythms of life both are needed and one is only diminished by the absence of the other. Only the one who has endured the darkness and despair and seeming hopelessness of life before and apart from the Messiah's coming can fully appreciate the arrival of the long awaited Savior and the marvel and wonder of the arrival of the light of the world at his birth.

And so, I ask in response to Jesus' words, what are you watching and waiting for as Advent begins again? What are you expecting? For what are you hoping and praying? To be quite honest, some of you haven't given it much thought. You are rather casual and nonchalant about both Advent and Christmas. Actually you were surprised and caught off guard when you entered the sanctuary and saw the wreaths and Christmas trees. This is not what you were expecting. In fact, you weren't expecting much of anything except maybe to see your friends or hear and meet the new preacher. And so, not expecting much of anything there has been little watching, little waiting, and consequently no preparation.

For Christians in this solemn season the object of our watching and waiting should be the adventus, the coming, of our Lord. During this season it is appropriate to celebrate not only our Lord's first coming as a helpless babe in a Bethlehem stable, but also his promised Second Coming in power and glory as the king and judge of the universe. Presbyterians speak so seldom of the Lord's return that some rightly wonder whether or not we even believe in it. Well, we do, despite our lack of emphasis. The first Sunday of Advent is one of the few times we bring it off the shelf and out of the creeds for study. Advent affords us this opportunity. Advent is supposed to serve as an eye opener for Christians, as an alarm clock at the beginning of the liturgical year which shouts and screams at us to wake up and get ready, to prepare ourselves for our Lord's imminent return and for the end of history as we know it. Will this Advent find us prepared, not to stand before your friends and relatives with packages in hand, but to stand before the Son of Man and give an account of our lives?

Today's lesson from Luke focuses on the coming of Christ, not his first coming, but his second. It is a distressing word for many, a threatening word that tells of strange signs in the heavens, of nations in perplexity and distress, of "people fainting with fear and foreboding at what is coming on the world." "Now when these things begin to take place," we read, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:28) Those words are both a promise and a warning. They can evoke fear and anxiety or they can produce confidence and hope. It all depends on what your relationship is to the coming judge. It all depends on where you place your trust, or in whom you place your trust for both the present and the future.

From a human point of view all periods of history have been somewhat precarious and uncertain. When have there not been nations in distress for one reason or another? When have there not been people overwhelmed by fear — fear of the unknown, fear of war or famine or depression, fear of whatever it is that seems to threaten life and security as we know it. No wonder the pages of history carry many an account of those who have thought the return of Christ was imminent, so imminent it could even be forecast with accuracy.

Apocalyptic language is always resorted to in scripture during threatening times, when people find themselves living in fear and trepidation. Seldom does Jesus use this language but here is one exception in what is called Synoptic Apocalypses.

From the East to the West, from the oldest to the youngest, we know all too well the climate of fear and despair in our day. Some years ago now when our daughter, Natalie was only five, she was accompanying me as we did some pre-Christmas shopping on Saturday. As we rode along in the car she obviously in deep thought. Suddenly she looked at me in all seriousness and inquired: "Daddy, is there going to be another World War?"

"I don't know, honey, why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was just wondering," she mused.

A moment later I continued: "And what would you do, Natalie, if you knew you were going to die?"

"I'd go to the hospital," she said, "What would you do?"

"I think I would want to tell my family how much I loved them and I would surely want God to know how much I loved him too."

Later I thought to myself, what kind of world have we created that makes precious five-year-old girls worry about nuclear war? Why couldn't she just blissfully concern herself with mud pies and paper dolls?

Natalie, however, was not alone in her worries. Surveys reveal that the fear of nuclear war is still one of the chief fears of young people today, second only to losing a parent. Even though the mythical Doomsday Clock turned back for a while with the breakup of the Soviet Union, it is now moving forward once again what with a growing list of rogue nations and well-funded terrorist organizations with the capacity to develop and use nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction plus a growing list of unstable and dangerous leaders.

This reminds me of one of the more thought-provoking books I've read, the novel by Morris West entitled, *The Clowns of God*. It is an intriguing story clouded by genuine despair over the state of the world. A fictional Pope Gregory XVII has a vision he believes to be from God which convinces him that the world will soon become a wasteland through a nuclear holocaust. He hopes to warn the world and prevent this catastrophe but the Roman Curia forces him to resign quietly rather than throw the church and the world into panic and chaos.

Carl Mendelius is a German professor and an old friend of the Pope's from earlier years, and he gets caught up in the drama of both the reality of the vision and the implications of it.

The book accurately picks up on the anxiety and fear hanging over the heads of many young people like the sword of Damocles. At one-point Professor Mendelius is conversing with his daughter, Katrin, about the future. She says, "The thing is, I am afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of always...just that. Of getting married and having children and trying to make a home while the whole world could tumble round our ears in a day."

Suddenly she becomes passionate and eloquent. "You older ones don't understand. You've survived a war. You've built things. You've had us; we're grown up. But look at the world you've left us! All along the borders there are rocket launchers and missile silos. The oil's running out so we're using atom power and burying the waste that will one day poison our children —You've given us everything except tomorrow." (pp.33-34)

Katrin's haunting words were strangely reminiscent of my own Natalie's. They are consistent with the fears of young people in America today. And when I read them I felt both saddened and angry that this is what we have allowed the world to come to, that, indeed, we cannot give our children tomorrow.

Yesterday I was on the phone with Natalie and reminded her of this incident from years ago. She did not remember it but she told me that just last week here little ten year old niece told her own parents that she was afraid to go into crowded areas because she was fearful that an active shooter might start firing away. So the object of our fears may change but fears impact each succeeding generation.

As I was stewing over these melancholy thoughts and growing sadder and angrier all the while, suddenly my mind was illumined and comforted by a liberating idea, an idea not far removed from the apocalyptic words of our Lord in Luke 21. It dawned on me: Who do I think I am, that I should be able to give tomorrow to my child or to yours? Am I the Lord of history? Is the world's destiny in my hands? Am I one wise enough or powerful enough to bring the universe to its intended goal? And what is more, even I could assure my daughter or yours that there would be no more wars, no more terminal illnesses, no more freak and fatal accidents, , no more untimely deaths of loved ones, would that knowledge in and of itself necessarily make her a better person? More faithful? More loving? More obedient? Not necessarily.

And so, for whatever reason Christ has chosen to let us in on the fact that there will be a second Advent. Jesus will come again! We've not been given to know when he will return and how he returns may even surprise us, but he desires that we watch and wait with expectancy and hope. Could it be that the knowledge that he might return at any moment serves to help us keep our priorities in order, our lives intact, our faith current, and our discipleship active? Did you ever have a boss or a supervisor who would drop by at unexpected times to view your work? Did you ever have a teacher who would give you periodic pop tests on the work you were supposed to be doing? Then I'm sure you know how waiting and watching, how preparing for the unexpected can keep you on your toes and can be an incentive to be busy, responsible and ready for any contingency that may come along. If we knew Christ were coming tomorrow, would we live differently today?

Advent reminds us to make ready for the return of Christ, to make ready for the final consummation of history, to make ready for our own death and our own time of accountability before the Son of Man. Are you doing that? Do you realize that your redemption is drawing near?

A fascinating article appears in the November 7<sup>th</sup> issue, *The Christian Century*, written by Matt Fitzgerald, a pastor from Chicago. He tells of a smartphone app recently created which he added to his phone and all it does is send him a text five times a day with the ominous message, "Don't forget you're going to die." Apparently the inspiration for the creation of the app is an

ancient Buddhist aphorism which says, “To find happiness, contemplate death five times a day.” Fitzgerald claims that this morbid sounding app named, “We Croak” has surprisingly and unexpectedly changed his life. At the strangest moments, when life is a challenge and he is dealing with something dark and depressing or when he is basking in beauty and joy, the message will arrive, “Don’t forget you’re going to die.” It has a way of putting life and faith in perspective. It reminds him to keep his priorities and his limitations ever in mind, to distinguish the trivial from the significant, the temporal from the eternal.

Now I am not suggesting you get the app. In fact, if you carry the words and the example of Jesus with you daily, you don’t need an app. Jesus reminds his disciples of the same truth and never more so than at the beginning of Advent. “Don’t forget you’re going to die.” The time for preparation is now.

Of course, I wish that I could guarantee tomorrow for my loved ones or yours, but I can’t. I cannot prevent some mad unstable general from pushing the button that launches us into World War III any more than I can prevent your brakes from failing as you leave the parking lot today. Do you hear what I am saying? Whether world history draws to a conclusion tomorrow or not, the personal history of any of us well could. Therefore, it always behooves us to watch and wait, to be prepared to meet our redeemer and our judge.

As Jesus promises and warns his disciples of his second Advent, he addresses these timely words to them: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all who live upon the face of the whole earth.” (21:34-35)

Now I don’t believe that the Lord would not have any of us go through life paranoid and afraid. But neither does God desire us to go through life blissfully ignorant of God’s expectations of us or totally absorbed in selfish, meaningless activities that sap our energy and render us ineffective in his service. In times of ease and disease, in moments of blessing or curse, whether the clouds on the horizon are latent with menace or full of promise — it is always appropriate for the people of God to have their affairs prepared for the Master’s return.

In Vicksburg, Mississippi, I followed Dr. William F. Mansell, who had been pastor of that church for 34 years. One of the most meaningful aspects of his ministry that people frequently recalled and mentioned was his practice of concluding every funeral service by quoting Mark 13:35, “Watch, therefore — for you do not know when the master of the house will come.” That was an effective message during a funeral, but it is appropriate at any time, is it not, and especially during Advent.

The first Sunday of Advent in accordance with the message of the Synoptic Apocalypse is both a promise of the Lord’s return and a warning not to take Christ casually. It challenges us to stop carelessly frittering away our lives and to make ourselves ready once again for his final arrival. The signs of the end have been fulfilled and are being fulfilled. It is only as we commit

ourselves anew to the Lord of history and the Savior of sinners that we can walk in the present and step into the future confident, unafraid, and filled with hope and joy. Our king is coming. Let us make ready!

**PRAYER:** Even so, Lord, quickly come, for we are watching and waiting. Help us to be ready as we busy ourselves with the tasks you give us to do, through Jesus, who told us to watch.

Amen.