

Sermon for Sunday, November 27, 2016

LOOK SHARP!

"Keep awake," cautions Matthew to a weary and disillusioned Christian community grown complacent about the second coming of Christ, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." The sudden and unanticipated death of a loved one always sharpens the edge on this ancient message.

Admittedly, Matthew writes about the apocalypse, which despite my conviction that it shall come one day, doesn't cause me to lose much sleep. But my personal apocalypse, that day that is my last on this earth when the Lord, God willing, will come for me, is something about which I have some concern. I do not know when that day will be. I pray it is many years hence. Yet I know that it could be as near as tomorrow.

Like some Christian friends I've known, who though tragically struck down by illness faced their last day with courage and unparalleled faith, who looked forward to communion with Christ and the saints, and who went on their way rejoicing and praising God, I want to be ready. I want to make sure I live an advent life, always prepared to meet my Lord, always watching for signs of his coming, always being faithful to witness to his claim upon me. I want to make sure that though I live immersed in this finite world, I keep a watchful eye on eternity, that I will never let my concern with worldly affairs, however necessary, completely distract me from remembering that there is a God, that issues of life and death are in God's hands, and that whenever God's call comes, at morning, at midday, or at evening, it will find me ready.

Life in Christ Jesus, is advent life. It is a life of preparation, a life of watchfulness, a life of faithfulness.

First, it is a life of preparation. Like pregnancy, life in Christ is a time to prepare oneself to receive the miraculous gift of new life.

Often the first clue that one is pregnant is an unsettledness in the stomach. It's a signal that something is different, that change is coming, that new life is a distinct possibility in one's future.

In a similar way, persons touched by Christ feel an unsettledness in their spirits, a sense that things are changing and will be different one day, a conviction that new life awaits them. The faithful in Christ heed that signal, and begin to prepare themselves to receive him fully. They join the church, study the Scriptures, confess their sin, grow in faith. Just as parents set up a nursery - redecorating the room, buying a crib, getting a changing table - the faithful prepare a place in their lives for Jesus. They make space, physical, emotional and spiritual space, to receive the gift of new life.

We all do this at Christmas time. We go to great pains to prepare a place in our homes for the birth of Christ, moving furniture for a tree, bedecking the halls with seasonal finery, playing special music to get in the holiday spirit. We even manage to make time in our busy schedules for special worship experiences, for Christmas celebrations and advent devotionals. The challenge to the person who would live in Christ is to keep this up all year, not the decorations mind you, but the spirit of preparation, the desire to be ready at all times to receive Christ's coming.

Life in Christ is also a life of watchfulness. One winter, I was watching the 11:00 p.m. news, when the weatherman reported that there had been sightings of the northern lights in outlying areas beyond the glare of city lamps. Having longed to see them, but never before having had the opportunity, I dashed outside into the darkness, and looked up. What I saw was simply breathtaking. The sky was ablaze with luminous, ethereal-like waves, pink, blue, white, yellow. They moved like massive theater curtains billowed by a silent wind, suspended over me from somewhere high in the heavens. I will never forget it.

If someone, somewhere had not been watching the horizon where the heavens and the earth meet, I would not have seen the aurora. But they were watching, and reported what they saw. And I, having the good sense to watch the news, heard their report and went to look myself, and was rewarded. I will be more attentive in the

future, to the horizon, where serendipitous displays of God's majesty and power continue to break forth in silent luminosity.

There is, I think, a horizon of the soul in each of us, a spiritual place in our heart of hearts where the divine image and our mortal selves meet. To watch that horizon for signs of God's awesome presence, in the hope of catching a glimpse of what lies beyond our life, in the hope of capturing but for a moment an insight to the kingdom that is coming, to see into the heart of God, is to lead an advent life.

We have a name for this silent watch upon the horizon of the soul. We call it prayer. Prayer is our looking upon and into, our communicating with and trusting in, the luminous presence of God in Jesus Christ. It opens a whole new dimension of life. Like when the stage hands at the end of the movie *White Christmas*, lift the backdrop to unveil the transforming snowfall of hope, prayer lifts the veil that blinds us to the transforming presence of the Almighty.

"Watch therefore," urged Matthew, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." If the end of my time, or the end of all time, is anticipated at every moment, then I must pray at every moment. Prayer must become not simply an occasional act of religious piety, but a way of life, a looking toward, a listening for, a searching for what God would have me see, and do and be. Prayer teaches the whole of one's life to become a watch, an attentive waiting for God, because you never know when the sky will open its mysteries or when the Lord will return, riding upon the blazing clouds. The person living in Christ, like a sailor keeping the watch, looks sharp upon the horizon of the soul with prayer, waiting in the darkness for eternal light, discovering how the end of time undulates like an aurora curtain above the boundary of the soul.

Finally, life in Christ is a life of faithfulness. We aren't called by God just to watch for his coming, but to be disciples, faithful witnesses to God's reign, living our lives in every moment for the glory of Jesus Christ. One gets the impression from Matthew's gospel that at least some in the Christian community were so caught up in wondering when the end would come, that they were failing to be about the business of the Great Commission. If "prayerful" is the adjective of the life in Christ, then "serving" is its verb. "Blessed is that servant," writes Matthew, "whom his master finds at work when he arrives."

Christmas, like Sunday morning, is when we tend to robe ourselves in our Christian best. We are more generous, more unselfish, more caring, more religious, more prayerful, more worshipful, and more faithful in everything than at any other time in the year. At Christmas, we try harder, because we expect it of ourselves. But Matthew warns us, that God has not promised that Christ will return between November 27th and December 25th. "The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." "Therefore, you must be ready." We are ready, when we are doing the work to which Christ has called us, not just at Christmas, but all year long.

An African-American poet writes:

There's a king and a captain high,
And he's coming by and by,
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

You can hear his legions charging in the regions of the sky,
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

There's a man they thrust aside,
Who was tortured till he died,
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

He was hated and rejected,
He was scorned and crucified,
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

When he comes! When he comes!

He'll be crowned by saints and angels when he comes.

They'll be shouting out Hosanna! to the man that men denied,
And I'll kneel among my cotton when he comes.

If we are about our Christian vocation, however simple that vocation may be, on the day Christ comes, there will be joy for us.

So life in Christ Jesus is advent life. It's a life of preparation, always making ready for the arrival of new life. It's a life of watchfulness, praying a silent watch upon the horizon of the soul while waiting expectantly for God's eternal light to break forth. It's a life of faithfulness, day in and day out living to the glory of God in eager anticipation of Christ's imminent return. It is courageous life, because only the watchful eye of the advent life can look to the past, to the present, to the future, and with joy and yearning say, "Come, Lord Jesus." "Come!"

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Matthew 24:35-44