

“Remaining Watchful”

Matthew 24:36-44

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This morning is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of our annual countdown to Christmas, and yet this morning’s scripture lesson doesn’t speak of the long-promised birth of a child as we have come to expect in Advent sermons. Instead of preparing us for the birth of Christ, we are confronted with Jesus’ words concerning his return in the Last Days followed by universal judgment. Rather than Isaiah’s promise that a son from the house of David would be born and his name would be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” we are reminded of how in the days of Noah, while people were busy eating and drinking, the floods came and swept them all away to their deaths. In the same way, we are told, the Son of Man will come, like a thief in the night, and wreak terrible judgment upon the world when WE least expect it.

Our scripture lesson from Matthew makes at least two curious claims: the first is that no one, not even JESUS, knows when the Second Coming will happen, and that people need to be ready when that event DOES occur. The second is that where there will be two men working in the field, one will be taken and the other left behind, and where there are two women grinding wheat, one will be taken up while the second will not. Here, Jesus is telling his disciples that unlike his FIRST coming--his birth in a manger in Bethlehem that signified how God was now “with us”- his SECOND coming will be for an entirely DIFFERENT purpose. It will be to execute God’s righteous judgment upon humanity, to judge each person for the choices they have made, the words they have spoken, and the works they have performed. At his return, people will be held accountable for everything they have ever done- a fearful warning indeed.

Now we in the mainline churches don’t like to talk about “Jesus” and “judgment” in the same sentence- I can’t think of another subject I would rather avoid. Ministers, like myself, love to wax lyrical about the joys and beauty of heaven from the pulpit. But then when we encounter a series of verses that speak about the SECOND ADVENT of Christ, when at the end of history, he will abruptly appear to put all things under his feet and to render upon every person his due, we suddenly develop lockjaw.

Early in my Christian life, I found myself attending a fundamentalist Bible church that prided itself on its literal interpretation of the scriptures. “This is where the Bible is the Big Book” they liked to brag. Well, it seemed like every sermon and Bible study would somehow end up with a focus on the return of Christ, his judgment, and the dangers of hell fire- and almost with a GLEEFUL expectation. A prominent theme was how in the Last Day, Jesus would leave heaven and return to earth, leading a vast army of his angels right behind him. Upon taking his place at his judgment seat, he would then begin to evaluate and pronounce sentence upon every man and woman depending upon the quality of his or her life and faith. Then would come his righteous judgments with TRUE believers gaining entrance to heaven and everyone else being consigned to hell to suffer everlasting torment. To be honest, I often found myself fearing and at times, even HATING God far more than I did LOVING him. In retrospect, it wasn’t a spiritually healthy place FOR ME OR ANYONE ELSE for that matter.

But there are many more Christians in the world who have felt the SAME way and come to the SAME conclusion. Last month, the Rev. Carlton Pearson died- he was a popular Pentecostal preacher who later in life had a revelation which led him to conclude that there is no such thing as hell. When he announced to his large congregation that he could no longer believe in it, he became an instant pariah among them. He watched his megachurch collapse almost overnight, had his mentor and closest friend--Oral Roberts--turn his back on him, lost his status as "bishop" in his denomination, was shunned by his community and ended up almost completely alone. He said that growing up in a family of fire-breathing preachers, all they ever talked about were the devil and his demons, hellfire and brimstone. As a result, they were fearful of EVERYTHING- afraid as much of GOD as they were of SATAN HIMSELF.

Then one day, he was watching a program on the history of the Rwandan genocide, how Hutu militias raped and killed thousands upon thousands of Tutsi people. Pearson was holding his daughter on his lap and started to talk to God. "I don't know how you're gonna call yourself a loving God and allow those people to suffer so much and then just suck them into hell," he said in his mind. And then in his mind, he heard God SPEAK BACK. "Is that what you think we're doing?" He responded to himself, "God...I can't save the whole world" which was immediately followed by God saying, "Precisely. That's what WE did!" It came as a revelation and from that moment on, he believed that God had saved EVERYONE through the work of Christ on the cross whether they knew him or NOT, that there was, in fact, no such place as hell. "God is not angry with humanity," he said. "He sees them all through the blood." Once he began speaking out about this, that's when all "hell broke loose" so to speak. He began receiving some national attention and his story was even turned into a Netflix film. Afterwards, he would say, "I'm the heretic and I enjoy that, wear that like a badge these days...It's like a tattoo that I can't wash off."

Like Carlton Pearson, in discovering a message of God's grace and love, I TOO experienced "deliverance"- delivered from a spiritually unhealthy place and their all-too dangerous preoccupation with sin along with demons and hell and eternal damnation. In my sermons, I prefer to focus on such positive themes as peace and love and hope and forgiveness as TOO MANY people in the world ALREADY feel like they're trapped in some kind of hell, most often in a pit of their own making. They seem to exist just from one day to the next, constantly overwhelmed by feelings of fear and guilt and self-loathing, longing for nothing more than some kind of deliverance from it all. It's no wonder we currently suffer from an epidemic of suicide in our nation!

When I look back over a half-century ago, what brought me to Christ in the FIRST place were NOT images of hell as a lake of fire and threats of eternal damnation for all my sins and wrongdoing. Rather, it was when I saw Jesus open his arms up wide to me and offer the appeal, "Come to me David, you who are weary and over-burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." It was discovering that I was being offered a personal and loving relationship with our Lord and that THROUGH him, my past could be wiped clean so that I could begin again with a whole new foundation upon which to build my life. THAT'S the message that I and the REST of the world needed to hear, not one about fire and brimstone and divine retribution!

Nor will you hear me preach sermons on the “rapture” either, the notion that any day now, all TRUE believers will suddenly and swiftly be taken up into the air to join Christ and the heavenly host and thus escape the calamities of the Great Tribulation. According to the proponents of this peculiar doctrine, somebody will be ironing clothes or cooking a meal or working on an assembly line when suddenly he or she will mysteriously disappear- suddenly transported into the air to be with Jesus. Everyone else will be left behind to deal with the Antichrist and the world-wide calamities which will ensue in the Great Tribulation. Back in the early 70’s, someone made a popular movie about it called “A Thief in the Night” which I saw with a friend of mine and it scared the living daylights out of us. One song in it--“I Wish We’d All Been Ready”--contained the lyrics:

*Life was filled with guns and war
And everyone got trampled on the floor
I wish we'd all been ready*

*Children died, the days grew cold
A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold
I wish we'd all been ready*

*There's no time to change your mind
The Son has come and you've been left behind*

*A man and wife asleep in bed
She hears a noise and turns her head
He's gone
I wish we'd all been ready*

*Two men walking up a hill
One disappears and one's left standing still
I wish we'd all been ready*

*There's no time to change your mind
The Son has come and you've been left behind*

There was even a familiar bumper sticker back then that stated if you didn’t see anyone driving that car, it was because the driver had been raptured and was now with Jesus. That was a scary-enough thought just in ITSELF!

Well, such an interpretation is entirely inconsistent with our own Reformed theology, our tradition, and with basic Christian principles. Rather than Jesus helping the Church escape in times of great tribulation, the Bible has clearly made known that it will be her faithful presence during such periods that will make the strongest statement as to the reality and power of God in the world- NOT her absence. Throughout history, persecution and tribulation have ALWAYS been an integral part of the Church’s story. The New Testament scholar N.T. Wright notes that the word *parousia* translated as “coming” in vv. 37 and 39 is not a reference to Jesus’ literal return to earth on a cloud but rather a term that suggests his “presence” or “arrival.” It speaks of the arrival of someone, such as a king who has been away for some time. Matthew was never trying to describe a future historical event here but through the use of prophetic language and imagery, speaking to our OWN accountability and responsibility before the king when he arrives. After all, Jesus did warn his followers in his Sermon on the Mount that not everyone

who says to him “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of his Father in heaven: *On that day, many will say, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then he will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.”* The point here was not that one day, in the final judgment, we are all going to find ourselves in some kind of heavenly courtroom with Christ as our judge delivering a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down verdict on our lives. Rather, we are being warned that there are grave consequences to following Christ, that Christian discipleship is not for the half-hearted or those who may be averse to risk but only for the most SERIOUS students for in the end, being a loyal follower of Jesus just may cost one his or her very life.

The scriptures are clear that the PURPOSE of Christ’s “advent” or SECOND coming is to assert his supreme authority and establish God’s reign at the end of the age. It is the long-anticipated “Day of the Lord” which was spoken of by the prophets, a day not just of accountability and justice but also a day of great HOPE for it promised that God would live among his people and sin and death would be no more and there would be unending peace among the nations. The Apostle John described that day in his book of Revelation when he wrote:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Although this is again prophetic language and imagery, the meaning is still clear. It is foremost a message of hope, the promise of reconciliation for all, a vision of a transformed world which is again anticipated every time we gather before Christ’s table for our Holy Communion meal.

What our text here is in fact telling us on this First Sunday of Advent is that we are all always to be ready, to be continuously on the alert because the end of our lives, in fact, the end of ALL history just may occur at any moment. Our text is really about our CONSTANT PREPAREDNESS than it is about our FINAL JUDGMENT. It warns each of us to be ready to meet Christ face-to-face AT ANY TIME. No one but God knows the length of days we have been apportioned here on this earth. The Greek word for “ready” or “preparedness” means to be vigilant, especially watchful and was used to describe a guard while “on the watch.” Thus, we are always to be ready and on the alert! The great hope that was described by the prophets in much of their apocalyptic writing was that though we may now be in the throes of sickness and conflict and brutality and broken dreams, there shall come a time--at a day and an hour known neither by the angels of heaven nor even by Christ himself--when all our struggles and travails will mercifully and permanently come to an end. On that day, we are assured the earth will be transformed and all flesh shall see it together, a time when all hatred and warfare shall end, when the cries of the poor and the aching of the hopeless will be no more.

And how do we remain alert? People who wait for the Lord are to conduct themselves as though the Lord will appear at any time. THAT is what it means to “keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” Wherever we are, whatever we do, God lays a

final claim upon our lives. Therefore, may we all live every moment to the glory of Christ as each deed we do and each moment we live just may be our last.

Thus, to watch for the coming of the Lord does NOT mean that we are all to go out, sell our possessions, and then assemble upon some mountaintop to wait for the end as some religious sects have done in the past. Nor does it mean that we are to live in constant fear that Jesus may suddenly come and we might be caught unawares. Rather, to be ready and watching DOES mean that we continue to live in right relationship with our God and with one another; it means that we strive to live lives Christ would be proud of; it means faithful service on behalf of his kingdom; and it means continued fidelity to Jesus even under the most trying times or dire circumstances. Watching for the Lord means that we keep our spirits open to the possibility of the arrival at any time, in any person and in every experience.

In other words, to watch and to wait properly is to be obedient to the call and claim of Christ upon our lives- from one moment to the next and wherever we might happen to be. It is to treat all people with the same love and respect as we would treat the Lord himself with, always mindful that he always comes to us when we least expect him and in ways we would never expect- in the helplessness of a small child, in the vulnerability of a poor immigrant, in the frailness of an elderly shut-in, in the need of a welfare mom, in the weakness of a recovering addict, in the insecurity of an unemployed worker. Therefore, we are exhorted to STAY AWAKE! TO REMAIN WATCHFUL! TO BE ALERT! May we continue to live every moment of our lives to the glory of Christ as each deed we do and each moment we live just may be our last. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, fill us all this morning with such passion and conviction as to the reality of your presence and your love that we may never doubt your promise of your coming again and of the new world you have already prepared for us. And may this hope cause us to be better and more faithful Christians until that day comes. In Christ's name we pray. Amen and amen.