

The Mood of Advent: Watching and Waiting

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Standing Watch

At sea, when they teach you to stand watch, they hand you a pair of binoculars and tell you to scan the horizon. But don't focus on any one spot for too long, they say. Use your eyes too. Look all around because you might miss what is obvious. They tell you also to pay attention to what you see out of the corner of the eye. It is more sensitive, they say. What you cannot see directly in front you may see out of the corner first, not clearly, mind you, but just a hint of it there when you look out on the horizon. At sea, you learn to watch. You learn to wait. You learn to be ready, but patient. You learn you never, never sleep.

At sea you can easily be fooled. You look out on the ocean in the daytime, at the waves, and think, "I could see someone in the water a mile away." But you can't, not even someone in an orange raft. Distances fool you. You look at a ship and think, "That's maybe 500 yards away." But it is not. It's five miles.

I once sent a crew out after a distress signal at night. As they were leaving the bay and heading into the gulf, the coxswain thought she saw a light on the horizon miles away and headed toward it; but it was not miles away, it was there, right there. It was a man in the water with a flashlight.

The Context

Watching and waiting are strong themes of Advent. "Watchman Tell Us of the Night" is the suggested lectionary hymn for the first Sunday in Advent (Handbook for the Common Lectionary), but you may have decided against it and chosen "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," or something else more like Christmas. As you well know, our culture has subordinated the themes of Advent to the tinsel already hanging in the malls and the more profitable themes of shopping and spending.

To begin with, any preacher who speaks of waiting and watching must know such a sermon will be met with some resistance. Andy Rooney may have spoken for all of us when he said, "Any line you choose to stand in during your life will usually turn out to be the slowest." We do not like to wait. So we choose McDonald's and Federal Express. So we grumble in line at the Post Office. Most of our culture is designed so that we do not have to wait, except, of course, when we visit the doctor.

In addition, we have lost the capacity to watch. In our culture most people associate the word "watch" with things like television and films. Ironically, the

biblical notion of watching requires some sense of imagination mixed with hope for what is real and present—the very qualities television and films have supplanted with a well-developed brand of escapism and fantasy.

My aim in this article is to present some insights on the themes of watching and waiting. I offer a discussion of Scripture's form and content mixed with illustrative material. Since the strongest focus given to watching and waiting during Advent falls on the first Sunday, I have limited most of my remarks to these three lectionary choices: Matthew 24.36-44, Romans 13.11-14, and Isaiah 2.1-5. Each is cast in a different literary form, but each depends upon a dominant notion of Advent: the One who is to come is making demands upon and promises for our present lives.

The Scriptures

Matthew 24.36-44: Therefore Watch!

These words of Jesus fall into an extended monologue that stretches from the beginning of chapter 24 to the last verse of chapter 25. Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives talking privately with his disciples. Skim chapter 24 and you will see the signs of the end: wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, tribulation, the darkened sun, and falling stars. "When you see these things," Jesus says, "you know the end is near." The problem, of course, is that these signs do not square well with our opening words, "But of that day and hour no one knows. . . ." Will we have some signs? Or will it indeed be like the days of Noah when people were eating, drinking, marrying unawares, until the first drops of rain began to fall?

Commentaries don't answer this question to much satisfaction. Perhaps it need not be. The focus of our pericope remains, "Watch and be ready." Read chapter 25, and you will find the parable of the wise and foolish maidens, and the focus repeated, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Keep in mind that these words are addressed to the disciples, the insiders, the church. We may be given privileged information, but we must also watch and wait. No one sees him clearly, at most we see only hints of his arrival.

Skim the rest of chapter 25 and you will see the parable of the talents followed by the image of all nations gathered before the throne. Here is the separation of sheep and goats, here is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the warning, "Truly . . . as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." "They will go away," Matthew warns, "into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." The tone of the entire section is one of warning. We watch and wait because we have been warned. As in the days of Noah, the world will be judged. Two men will be in the field, one will be taken, another left. Two women will be at the mill; one will be taken, the other left. Our undisturbed lives will be shaken. The time will come like a thief unexpected. We must be ready.

Though our text sounds fashionable to use along with the "Four Spiritual Laws," "Romans Read and Review," and other personal salvation materials,

the warning of judgement extends also to those who promote oppression and injustice. The preacher in Advent would do well to remember not to focus on any one spot for too long. Look all around. The need for peace is just as real and present. Judgement on injustice comes at the hour least expected.

The preacher would also do well to consider the power of story as a form in preaching. Matthew makes full use of story. The words of Jesus fall into a larger gospel story. Our passage includes the story of Noah, stories of those taken and left, and of the thief in the night.

Stories have a revelatory power all their own. Biblical stories cannot be reduced to morals, or used for their historical accuracy, neither do they serve as sources of fantasy or escapism. When Matthew recalls the story of Noah, the reader remembers judgement, destruction, and promise. Without additional explanation, the story serves up these themes. Stories evoke imagination; they inspire us to hope. It is not necessary in the use of stories to make the point and move from that point to its parallel with the text. It is often enough to let the theme or point be carried with the images and metaphors.

We began, for example, with some material from my days in the Coast Guard. I related things I was taught and a brief story of a rescue boat leaving the bay. We could end a sermon by saying, "Today we watch and wait like sailors at sea. Just as sailors . . . etc, etc." Or, instead, we could draw from the language and images provided by the opening material to shape the Word to the church today: Christ is coming at a time least expected. Watch and wait. Do not miss what is obvious. Do not be fooled by what you think you see. Pay attention to what you see out of the corner of your eye. If you see anything, you may see it there first. Not clearly, mind you, but just a hint of it on the horizon.

Romans 13.11-14: The Advent Ethic

Any preacher addressing Romans on the far side of chapter 12 knows this is ethical territory. The rough rule is: Romans 1-11 tells us what to believe, while Romans 12-16 tells us how to act. The title at the top of my Bible reads, "Duties of the Christian Believer." And if you start at the beginning of chapter 13 you will see some duties laid out nicely: "Be subject to the governing authorities . . . owe no one anything . . . Thou shalt not kill . . . steal," and so forth. By the end of the chapter, our passage reads almost like something tacked on for good measure. "Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now to wake from sleep. . . . [Therefore,] ". . . put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh" So the sense is, we have been told how to act. The approach of salvation is further reason to obey. One issue, though, is quickly raised. We have been told the time is at hand for almost two thousand years, and we are tired of the wait.

A common way to get around it is to talk about kinds of time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is the time we measure with our watches while *kairos* is God's time. But this is a little like the joke about the Einstein watch: it not only tells you the time but why. While it may be true that God operates outside of time, this notion doesn't offer much hope for us who live with our calendars and

clocks.

To play with definitions of time, therefore, may be a side issue. While Matthew suggests we watch because of what no one knows, Paul suggests we wake and act because of what we do know: the hour of salvation is near. The night is far gone. On the one hand, this nearness is making demands upon our present attitude and conduct. While Matthew brings us only to anticipation and readiness, Paul identifies waiting and watching as appropriate action: Put off the desires of the flesh. Put off the works of darkness. Put on the armor of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Conduct yourselves becomingly.

On the other hand, this nearness does not guarantee any clarity of vision. In the Armand Hammer Exhibit, for example, there is a painting called *Mardi Gras, Boulevard Montmare*, by Camille Pissaro. When you stand right in front of the painting, you see a confusing mass of colors smeared and dabbed on the canvas. But when you step back, all the blobs and dabs and smears become thousands of people, crowding the streets of a city. Perhaps the time is too near to see.

Finally, note the matter of form. Paul's letter to the Romans relies on rhetoric and reason. He argues for faith and responsibility. His logic is clear; his metaphors are strong: Wake from sleep, cast off the works of darkness, put on the armor of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ. His metaphors are exhortations to the church. How are they received today? What new metaphors can the preacher design to depict appropriate conduct today? Paul lists conduct that is inappropriate. What conduct is inappropriate today? Again, we can explain the connection between Paul's logic in Romans and the logic by which we preach, or we can draw from the language and images provided to construct our own exhortation to the church: Christ is coming. Salvation is near. Watch what you do. Watch what you say. Never, never sleep. What you think you can see easily, you can't. What you think is far away is here, right here before you.

Isaiah 2.1-5: The Word in View

Earlier this year I picked up a copy of the *New York Times*. On the front page was this: "KABUL, Afghanistan—The guerrilla rockets started to hit the eastern districts of this capital shortly after 3:00 p.m. today, sending great clouds of dust rising into the still winter air. At the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel, a man sweeping the tennis court paused for a while to watch, then calmly resumed his work."

What caught my eye in this report was the demeanor of the tennis court sweeper who witnessed the attack. He "paused for a while to watch, then calmly resumed his work." In simple contrast, Isaiah witnessed a vision of peace which demanded attention and responsibility. Matthew urges us to watch because we know not when the Lord will come. Paul urges us to conduct ourselves appropriately because the time is near. But Isaiah invites us to walk in the light of the vision we have been shown. In contrast to Matthew and Paul who speak of what we do and do not know, Isaiah speaks of what we see.

Isaiah's vision is strange and symbolic. What we cannot understand or explain we may have to show in relationship to other symbols. If we cannot fully

understand the mountain or the law, we can at least imagine Sinai centuries before and the first law handed down by God to Moses. If we cannot explain why nations and people flow to the mountain, we might imagine the story of a time when people were scattered from the tower-mountain of Babel. And the judgement of God between nations may seem a vague and ambiguous thing, but we can imagine swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. In other words, if we take the vision at face value, as words that paint a picture, we have the image of a sacred place lifted as holy, of people coming together, and of a new judgement to resolve violence. We have a vision by which we are called to walk.

At one level the church is to preach and teach this vision, and to support those groups and individuals who give their lives to it. We are to offer it as an alternative to the war and violence we see today in the daily papers, on the news, in films, and on the television. This means we are to hold up the biblical vision, which is what the Soviets, of all people, did when they built that statue years ago at the United Nations showing a man beating a sword into a plowshare and included an inscription of the words of Scripture beneath. It means also, the church is to imagine her own contemporary visions of peace and justice.

But at another level the vision is a view of what God intends for us. It is God's wish. God's wish is to bring people together who were scattered. God's wish is to bring justice between nations. God's wish is that we beat our swords into plowshares or our bombs into bathtubs, that we walk in this light of the Lord.

God's wish is not something God has planned for the last and final days, as if Isaiah foretells the future, as if this vision of peace is something we can escape into or fantasize about. God intended the vision in Isaiah's day to change things then, and God intends this vision to change things today. God intends that we be shocked into seeing, surprised, inspired into seeing, because our great problem is that we fail to see. We only pause for a while to watch, then calmly resume our work.

Finally, the preacher should remember that Isaiah's prophecy makes use of image more than story or logic. It is the word Isaiah saw. As with the use of story, it may not be necessary to explain the meaning of each image and take this to our situation today. Isaiah imagines the holy mountain raised above the hills, nations flowing to the house of Jacob, and people walking in the light of the Lord. So we can imagine the church, this holy place where people come together—our hill far away—our cross lifted high—our Christ raised—our walk in the light of the Lord.

Watching and waiting: a word study

A quick glance at the English concordance under the words "to watch" and "to wait" will tell you two things. The books of the Old Testament (led by cries in Psalms and Isaiah) are filled with references to persons who "wait on the Lord." The Gospels, with only a few references to waiting, seem largely uninterested in this word. Instead, they favor the verb "to watch" (gregoreo).

Normally, we think of waiting as requiring humility and patience—the patience of Job. We think of watching as an act of expectation. Something is about to happen. Given this and word use alone, the Gospels seem to have given up waiting in favor of watching. It sounds sensible enough when you consider Israel’s long, hard wait for the Messiah in contrast with the early church’s anticipation of Christ’s return. But distinctions blur and the active and passive associations we make to watching and waiting are not so easy to affirm in further study.

If you examine the verb “to wait” (qawa) in Hebrew, you will discover it has the same verb root as that used for the verbs “to look for” and “to hope.” In the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Moody, 1980), to wait is defined as “to look for with eager expectation.” It is “an expression of great faith . . . a confident hope that God will decisively act. . . .” Even more intriguing than the root connection between waiting and hope are two other derivatives listed: “line” (basically, a measuring line, as in Isaiah 28.17 or Jeremiah 31.39) and “might” (Isaiah 18.2). Like any word study, much or little can be made of these connections. But at the very least, they suggest that waiting for Old Testament writers carried less the connotation of humble servanthood (as in waiter) and more the notions of expectation, confidence, strength, and judgement.

By far, the most concentrated New Testament use of the verb “to watch” is found in the Mark’s parallel to our text from Matthew, Mark 13.34-37. Four times Jesus exhorts his disciples with “Watch!” In Mark’s version of the garden scene, Jesus asks his disciples three additional times to “watch” or “watch and pray.”

In Matthew, the verb “to watch” (gregoreo) doesn’t appear until we find it in chapter 24. Then, as in Mark, it is used three times by Jesus in the garden (with a strong parallel to Luke). He says to those with him, “remain here, and watch with me . . . could you not watch with me one hour?” and, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation . . .” (Matt. 26.38, 40, 41). The last two references, (tereo), in Matthew, concern the soldiers who later “kept watch” over his body (Matt. 27.36, 54). Then there is also the notion that one keeps “a watch” (phulake), or is actively “guarding.” This is the word used of the householder.

The first surprise of this study, then, may be the similarity between Old Testament notions of waiting and New Testament notions of watching. Each is filled with hope and expectation. Each anticipates the act, arrival, and judgement of God. The second surprise, for Advent at least, is that watching (in the Gospels) is associated more with the death and second coming of Christ than his birth. This raises some important questions. What were they to watch for in the garden? The soldiers? The end? A miracle? And what is there for us to watch for if it is not Christ coming in the clouds with glory?

The Word

On Sunday morning the Advent preacher more than likely faces a congregation of those who watch and wait for the immediate satisfaction of December

25, and plan this Christmas to shop until they drop. So confronted, the preacher must proclaim a Savior whose coming demands our attention, whose nearness encourages our decent conduct, and whose words evoke our imagination. But all is not lost. The mood of Advent is similar to the mood of December. Fantasy is a close cousin to imagination, and our anticipation of the gift-giving day is not so different in character from our anticipation of the presence of God. If the One who comes is making demands upon and promises for our present lives, then during Advent, it may be wise not to confront our culture's Christmas spirit, but to make full use of the mood and expectation it brings.

The challenge to the preacher is to make the best of a season of postponed joy. Our news, of course, is different, as is our joy. The coming of Christ offers more to imagine than a family reunion and a pile of packages under a tree, more to capture our attention, more reason to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. When we watch and wait for the coming of Christ into our lives, we watch for the evolution of God's imagination. We anticipate the future God intends. We live in a time of tension between what God has done in the past and what God will do in the future. We live responsible for what we must do. And if the Christ we proclaim said "watch" most often near his death, then what God imagines and intends may not always be the kind of joy to the world we would expect this time of the year. By faith, we live bound to what God will do. In the garden, the empty tomb, or the manger, we depend upon God for resolution.

In Advent, then, when you speak of watching and waiting, tell your congregation not to focus too long on the packages. Say, "Look all around. Watch for the dreams you are right on top of but never notice. Watch for needs that are real and present. Watch ahead because the church rarely stands still in her waiting. The church is always going. Watch where you go. Watch what you do." Tell them watching can be agony, but in the very act of watching we become people who live today by a hope in God's tomorrow. We wait for God's tomorrow. Tell them not to be dismayed by distances. Hope is closer than any of us think. Finally, say, "Pay attention to what you see out of the corner of your eye. It is more sensitive. What you cannot see directly, you may see there first, not clearly, mind you, but just a hint of it on the horizon."