



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“KEEPING WATCH”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, November 29, 2009.

I am sure it caught many of you by surprise as you entered the sanctuary this morning. Why you have hardly finished your Thanksgiving turkey and leftovers and now you discover upon your arrival that it is already the first Sunday in Advent, meaning Christmas is but a few weeks away. But it must be true. The Advent wreath is before us and those advent hymns that are haunting for some and maddening for others are being sung this Sunday.

Maybe that is as it should be. Advent is a season replete with contrasting emotions and competing convictions. It is something of a time warp for most of us because we are caught between our memories of the past and our hopes for the future. What do I mean by that?

On the one hand we try in this season of Advent to identify with God's people long ago as they waited anxiously, expectantly, and with restless urgency in the darkness and despair of their lives for God to send his promised Messiah. In Advent we cry out with Isaiah of old, “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...” On the other hand, we cannot fully identify with Israel because despite our best efforts, despite our pretending to be there in Israel's darkness, our darkness is uniquely different from theirs as Christians because we know the end of the story. We know, even here in Advent, that the Messiah has already come and we are desperate to sing joyful carols of his birth and not the somber songs of waiting and wishing for the redeemer to arrive.

We are not only caught between our memories and our hopes but we are also caught between the first coming of the Lord which we celebrate and his second coming which we anticipate. So in a sense, like Israel of old we too are waiting for the Messiah's arrive, but not for his first but rather his final coming.

If the liturgical cry of Easter “Alleluia”, then the cry of Advent is “Maranatha” a New Testament phrase usually translated from the Aramaic as “Our Lord, Come!”. What adds to the dialectical nature of this season is that according to scholars these two Aramaic words, *maran* and *atha* when combined can be rendered either in the perfect tense as “Our Lord has come” or in the imperative sense commanding or pleading “Come, Our Lord!” So once again we are caught between our memories of the past and our hopes for the future.

To be sure, it is easier to deal with the first Advent during this season of the year. Popular sentiment is on this side because everyone loves the original Christmas story, believers and non-believers alike. Even the ungodly, even non-Christians find themselves strangely drawn to the story of the innocent babe in the manger. It is a lovely story, they think whether it be true or not. Not so, however, with the Christ who returns in judgment and redemption. Believers may regard his second advent as a message of promise and hope but even among believers they are not praying too fervently “Come, Lord Jesus!” the thought of the end of the world and of our Lord's return is a scary one. And for the non-believer the Second Advent is viewed more as a threat than as a promise.

Consequently, it is far more difficult to get the world to take the Second Advent seriously. And yet people get worked up about it. Any story, any movie about the end of the world and the Apocalypse seems to fascinate Americans in particular. This year we have a big month in December for end of the year movies with “2012”, “Collapse” and “The Road” all come to theaters this Advent. So people are fascinated by the Apocalypse but also frightened by it.

Our Gospel lesson this Sunday forces us to consider the Lord’s Second Advent. The passage comes from what is called, “The Little Apocalypse” found in the 13 chapter of Mark. In this section Jesus is speaking to the disciples who formed the inner circle among the twelve, to Peter, James, John and Andrew. According to verse 3 they are seated on the Mount of Olives beyond the little valley that separates them from Mount Zion and they can see the temple from where they are seated. Many of us have stood on the Mount of Olives and looked across this Kidron valley to the old city of Jerusalem. It was here that Jesus began to discuss how the temple would be destroyed and the nervous disciples asked him privately, a part from the others, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all of these things are about to be accomplished?” Then it is that Jesus begins this haunting apocalyptic description of the end times. He warns them to be on guard because many will attempt to lead the faithful astray in the latter days. There will be false messiahs and false prophets who will make all manner of outlandish claims and predictions. So they are to be forewarned and to accept that no one has been given God’s time table in this matter, not even God’s son.

What then are believers to do, believers past and present, as we live in this interim between the Lord’s first coming and his second? Our Lord’s message to us is clear, concise, and consistent. We are in a word to “watch”. We are to be awake, to be alert, and to be vigilant and prepared. And we are to be like this in all times and seasons, not merely in the four weeks of advent.

Granted, it would be easier to be vigilant and watchful if we knew just what to expect and when to expect it. We know that much of our Lord’s language here is symbolic and we also know that if we knew precisely when the Lord would return we would be better prepared or would we?

What does it mean to keep watch for the Lord’s return? There was no word that Jesus spoke more frequently to his disciples than this word which is rendered as “watch” or “keep awake”. He uses it three times in this chapter alone. Combined this with his other word of warning that is usually translated as “take heed” or “beware” which occurs 4 times in chapter 13 and you get the unmistakable impression that the Lord would have his disciples to always be at the ready, to always be alert and vigilant and never to be caught off guard. And to drive home the point Jesus tells a very pointed parable, as was his custom. We call it the Parable of the Householder. Jesus says it is like a man going on a journey. When he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work to do, he commands the doorkeeper to be on watch. “Watch, therefore --- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow, or at dawn --- lest he find you asleep when he suddenly arrives.” And so what I say to all of you is “keep awake”.

My friends, there is a sense in which our master is still away. Oh, I know, spiritually Christ is present with us still but physically he will return suddenly and when we may least expect it. So he says to us as he said to those closest to him --- keep awake! Watch! Do not be caught unaware for you see, when the Lord returns there will be no opportunity to make ready of do the things he has left in our charge.

How meaningful and poignant these words must have been to the first readers of Mark’s gospel. With good reason they expected an imminent return of their Lord. Most Bible scholars believed that Mark’s gospel was written between 65 & 70 A.D. And what was happening at that time? The destruction of the temple which Jesus alludes to in verse 2 of chapter 13, would have occurred in 70

A.D. under the Roman General Titus who destroyed the temple stone by stone, as Jesus predicted. Jerusalem would fall and Israel would be eliminated as a nation not to return until 1948 when the United Nations declared that there should be a nation by this name once again. Earthquakes had occurred at this time as they have occurred in ours. False messiah's had arisen claiming to be the returning Christ. False prophets had claimed special knowledge of the end times and for proof of their theories had pointed to signs and wonders, historical developments and earthly tribulations. So, you see that none of this is peculiar to our age. They didn't have the movies to frighten them back in the first century but they had plenty of visionaries who could scare the wits out of them.

Mark's first readers were also painfully familiar with the persecutions and trials that Jesus had alluded to in verses 9 and following because civil strife had outlived Roman patience and the threats against the church, which had begun under Emperor Caligula in 39 & 40 A.D. were now being carried out by his successors. Jews and Christians were being oppressed and slaughtered and after fleeing to the mountains, a band of some 960 faithful Jews were holding out at a mountain fortress called Masada. By 73 A.D. they decided to commit mass suicide rather than to submit to the Romans who were on the verge of entering their fortress by way of a ramp that had been constructed using Jewish slaves.

So Mark's first readers may have found it easier than we do to watch and to wait for the Lord's return. Nevertheless, the word of our Lord is addressed to all disciples, past and present --- stay awake! Watch!

I am convinced that the necessity for watchfulness is made all the more imperative because of a great truth that Jesus realized and so should we --- and that is that each moment in time, every season and ever stage of life contains infinite possibilities for good and for evil, for faithfulness and for disobedience, for courage and for cowardness, for blessing and for curse. We need always to watch and stay alert because the Savior and the tempter are always at hand and both would gladly have us do their work.

The Lord has entrusted to those who await his coming awesome responsibilities and sacred privileges, but we dare not ignore them or delay them because the master may enter at any moment and we would not be found asleep, or apathetic or serving other gods or preoccupied with trivial matters.

Disciples, therefore, should keep watch and be vigilant because each hour of everyday presents us with opportunities either to serve or to betray the Master who will soon return.

Let me point out an intriguing thing in our lesson for today, something that makes the words of Jesus all the more poignant for subsequent generations. Look at your Bibles at verses 35 & 36 in Mark 13. If you are using a pew Bible open to page 826 where it can be found. If we left off the second half of verse 35, the part set off in the text by a dash, the Lord's words would have been, "Therefore, keep awake or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly." The words I omitted, words set off from the rest of the text in many English Bibles say, "For you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow, or at dawn."

Now if these were the actual words of Jesus then they prove to be either very prophetic and at a minimum intriguing. Some critics believe that these words may have been added by the brilliant writer of the first gospel as a literary device because they are a precursor of things that are about to transpire in chapters 14 & 15. The writer of Mark's gospel uses a number of literary devices in the telling of his gospel story and this may have been one. At any rate, while there is not sufficient time to go into detail about it here from the pulpit, it will soon become clear for those who continue in this gospel that Jesus is about to be betrayed first in the evening, as Judas gets up from the table in the upper room to go and

get the arresting authorities, and then at midnight when the troops awake sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest their Lord, and then at cockcrow when Peter denies the Lord as he had prophesied, and finally at dawn when Mark reports that “all the disciples deserted him and fled.” Disciples --- do you see why Jesus wants us to be on guard, alert and awake? Every moment from evening to midnight to cockcrow to morning light presents us with profound opportunities either to serve or to deny the Master. Keep awake, therefore, for none of us knows when the Master will come. And when he finally came for the first Advent, to whom did he appear? Was it not the shepherds who were “keeping watch” by night and I dare to believe that when he returns he will be recognized and welcomed by those who also “keeping watch” in their own day and in their own way.

So my friends, Advent calls us anew to watchfulness, to vigilance, and to preparedness. If you knew the Lord was returning before the morning light, would you do anything differently today? If so, then you would be wise to be about it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray:

Eternal God, you taught us that the night is far spent and the day is at hand. Keep us also awake and alert watching for your kingdom and standing on tiptoe looking for the glorious return of Jesus as our Judge and Savior. When he comes may he find us busy and brave doing the work he has committed to our charge and may we be prepared to joyfully give him praise, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.