

“Watching and Waiting”

“And what I say to you I say to all: keep awake.”

“Dirty Jobs” was a television program that featured its host, Mike Rowe, participating in difficult, strange, disgusting or messy occupational duties. While none of the jobs I held during my student years were quite as arduous as those featured on this show, I did have my share of unusual employment experiences before I was ordained as a pastor. One of the most memorable was the summer I worked the overnight shift as a night watchman at the American Standard plant in Piscataway, NJ. Even though there were no state secrets to guard here (unlike my other security job at Lockheed Electronics, which was a contractor for the US Department of Defense), it was important to have someone in the building overnight to watch over it so that nothing happened during those hours. It wasn’t a particularly difficult job (the greatest challenge was staying awake during the early hours of the morning), but it was a job that required vigilance, staying alert in watching for any problems as I waited for the dawn and the arrival of the first shift of workers in the morning.

Even if you’ve never had a job that required you to watch and wait, we have all had the experience of being in that position of waited for someone or something to arrive, looking for any sign of their immanent appearance. Even though trains run on a schedule, commuters are known to look down to tracks for any sign of the light that will signal that their train will soon be pulling into the station. Parent of teenagers will often sit up well past their bedtimes, waiting for the safe return home of their children. People sit in hospital room waiting for news that they have been wanting – or dreading to hear. When we have no idea how long our watching and waiting will last, it is a fact of life that “the waiting is the hardest part.”

Today, we begin a new church year on the first Sunday of the season of Advent, which takes its name from a word meaning “coming.” In this four-week season, we are called to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; we will lift our voices ask our Lord “*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*,” in anticipation of the birth of the child who is “God with us.” It is a season in which we prepare our homes for our Christmas celebrations as we have prepared our church home for our gathering on the holy night in which “Christ the Saviour is born.” As the lights on the Advent wreath grow, so does our anticipation of this annual celebration in this “most wonderful time of the year.” But Advent also invites us to consider another coming: that of our Lord who we believe will “*come again in glory to judge the living and the dead*,” the “second coming” of our Saviour who promised his disciples that “*I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also*.” (John 14:3). Even as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christmas, Advent invites us to watch and wait for the coming of our Lord in fulfillment of all of God’s promises to his people.

Today’s Gospel lesson shifts our focus from preparations for Christmas to preparations for this coming of our Lord Jesus Christ into our lives. In the thirteenth chapter of Mark’s gospel, the discourse shifts our attention from the actions of Jesus and his disciples to events that will follow Jesus’ death and finally the end times. In language reminiscent of what we hear in apocalyptic books such as Daniel and Revelation, Jesus describes what will happen in the days that will herald the arrival of the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom:

- “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” – 13:24-27.

The coming of the “Son of Man” (a title Jesus frequently uses for himself that is taken from Daniel: *“As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.”* – Daniel 7:13) will follow the heavenly signs of the end of the world: the astronomical bodies will cease to perform the functions for which they were created (*“God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.”* – Genesis 1:17-18). Such predictions draw from the imagery of the prophets, where a divine appearance causes turmoil in nature (*“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.”* – Isaiah 13:10). The nations will see the coming of the Son of Man coming in the clouds with divine glory as God gives judgment on their behalf and bestows an everlasting dominion over them (*“But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever.”* – Daniel 7:18). As the fig tree’s blooming is a certain sign of summer, when those who hear Jesus’ words see “these things,” they will know that *“he is near, at the very gates.”* (13:29). This knowledge is accompanied by the assurance that the words of Jesus are truly the “words of eternal life”; even though *“heaven and earth pass away ... my words will not pass away”* (13:31); for though *“the grass withers, the flower fades ... the word of our God will stand forever.”* (Isaiah 40:8).

But even though Jesus’ followers have the assurance that *“this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place”* (13:30), Jesus warns them not to engage in speculation as to when this will occur; for *“about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* (13:32). No human being knows God’s plan for the coming of the end time; as Jesus will again warn his disciples in the moments before his ascension, *“it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”* (Acts 1:7). If the time is unknown, then no one can expect a warning of its arrival – *“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.”* (13:36). The only solution is constant watchfulness: *“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”*

- “On the one hand, Mark underscores the certainty of Jesus’ word. Readers know that the death of Jesus on the cross does not end the story of salvation. On the other hand, Christians need not concern themselves with apocalyptic speculation. Disciples should remember that doing the will of God has no relationship to the timing of divine judgment. Neither should Christians concern themselves with the fate of those who persecute them and reject the gospel. When Christians rush to judge others, they should remember this exhortation. The only question the master will ask is whether the servants have been faithful to their call as disciples.” – PHEME PERKINS.

The watching and waiting of Advent presents us with two different scenarios. On the one hand, we know exactly how long we will have to wait until Christmas arrives: the four candles of the Advent wreath grow brighter as the day of our Saviour’s birth arrives, and as we open the doors of our Advent calendars we move closer and closer to the coming of that most holy night. But on the other hand, we do not know how long we will have to watch and wait until our Lord comes again at the fullness of time to accomplish all that God has promised. But the unknown duration of this period of watching and waiting is not an invitation to idleness, of passively sitting on the sidelines until our Lord makes his appearance. On the contrary, it is a call to action; as Jesus warns his followers that it is not up to them to know the times or periods that God has set by his own authority, he also commissions them for the work that will be theirs during these days in between from the time of his ascension to the day when he comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead: *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). We are called to heed the warning of the Apostle to *“be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.”* (Ephesians 5:15-16). Even if the Lord were to appear again before this year’s Christmas arrived, we are still called to view every day as a gift and an opportunity to serve in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- “Once asked what he would do if he believed the world would end tomorrow, Martin Luther is said to have responded, ‘I would plant a tree today.’ We also, confident of God’s love and sure of

God's promises about the future, can also invest in the present, in the everyday and the ordinary, in the people and causes all around us. For we have God's promise in the cross and resurrection of Christ that in time God will indeed draw all of God's creation not just to the end, but to a *good* end." – David Lose.

In the opening words of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers words of thanksgiving that lay out the scope of the Christian life, and within that framework celebrate the way in which the Corinthian believers have been enriched and amply supplied with *charismata*, "spiritual gifts."

- "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." – 1 Corinthians 1:4-6.

God has supplied his Church with all of the gifts it needs to accomplish God's Will; and what God has begun, God will surely bring to completion (*"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."* – Philippians 1:6). This guarantee is grounded in God's faithfulness, but it must be matched by faithfulness and proper living on the part of believers.

- "Paul's thanksgiving reminds the Corinthians of how richly they have been graced by God and of how God is faithful to carry through on what has been promised." – J. Paul Sampley.

Advent calls us to watch and wait for the coming of our Saviour in our time even as we celebrate the coming of our Lord *"when the fullness of time had come [when] God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children."* (Galatians 4:4-5). We watch and wait in trust and hope that as God has been faithful in fulfilling his promises in the past that God will surely fulfill all of these coming promises in God's good time. In the meantime, we watch and wait while we use the gifts God has entrusted to us to love one another, serve one another, and let the light of Christ shine in the world so that it might know that the darkness that descends upon us is not the final word for humanity, because in the coming of Christ at Christmas we also have the hope that *"the hopes and fears of **all the years** are met in thee tonight."*

- "Today's Gospel reminds us that Advent is about more than our preparation for the Church's celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas. Advent is also about preparing ourselves for Christ's return in glory at the end of time. Like the disciples and the faithful in Mark's community, we must also stay alert and watchful. Our faithfulness to God, through the good times as well as the difficult times, shows us to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man." – Sunday Connection, Loyola Press.

My duties as a night watchman at American Standard involved more than merely being present in the building through the "wee small hours of the morning." I was issued a time clock which I had to punch at various stations of a route that I walked at regular intervals throughout the night, proof to my bosses and the insurance company that I was actively watching over every part of the building entrusted to my care until the morning workers arrived at the end of my shift. Our watching and waiting is also no time for idleness; God has blessed us with a variety of spiritual gifts – all that we need to accomplish God's Will – and the proof that we have been faithful in this time of anticipation is in the fruits that we bear in faithfulness to the one who comes to us at Christmas and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead – the one whose kingdom will have no end. Amen.