

Psalm 80:1-7
Mark 13:24-37

“Active Watching”

R.P.C.
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Have you ever attended a dinner party at a friend’s home along with some other guests, only to find yourself waiting for one of the tardy guests to arrive? I expect it is a rather common experience for all of us, and we have likely been on both sides of the situation – among those guests who are left waiting, AND we have been that guest who is embarrassingly late.

Have you ever closely observed the host and hostess in such situations? As difficult it may be for those hungry guests to patiently await the arrival of the late-comers for dinner, it is even more stressful for the host and hostess. Not only must they create a diversion – a conversational topic of some kind to keep the dinner guests entertained, but they also have to worry about the timing the serving of the now-prepared and ready-to-eat food. It is often the host or hostess who are the ones glancing at the clock, or peeking out the window, looking and hoping for the arrival of the late-comers.

In such situations there are primarily two responses: The guests are required to passively and patiently wait; and the host and hostess are involved in “active watching,” combined with a sense of anxious anticipation.

Advent, the church’s liturgical season we begin this morning, invokes a similar kind of passive or active response from us. The question Advent poses to us each year is, are we to merely passively wait for Christmas to arrive, or are we to be involved in “active watching?”

Krister Stendhal once observed that both faithful Jews AND faithful Christians are still engaged in anticipating the Messiah: Jews, who still await the advent of the Messiah for the first time, have no idea as to when it will occur, or who the Messiah will be – hence every new-born male is a potential prospect. But we Christians, who have already welcomed the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ, feel we have at least some idea as to who he is when he returns as promised – though we too do not know exactly when. At least our scriptures have given us a few ideas as to HOW he will arrive. That means, as we enter this new Advent Season, Jews will still be patiently waiting, but Christians are to be “actively watching.”

Unfortunately, most people in our culture are neither waiting, nor watching. They either have not been told, or do not believe that there is something to wait for or watch for during this season – other than pre-Christmas sales. Many are

simply caught up in desperation as they seek some resolution to the difficulties of their lives. Others are so busy seeking the pleasures of life that they have little concern whatsoever for what may be the issues of higher value. So it is that many neither wait nor watch because they are either attempting to deal with their hopelessness, OR are madly pursuing pleasure for the self.

The Word of God calls on us eternally have courage and hope in the midst of our faithful waiting. But the Gospel we have and know goes beyond simply passive waiting – it calls for a vigilant watching – an active, expectant watching. If we will notice, “watch” is the key word in the text from Mark for today. “Take heed, watch,” says Jesus, “for you do not know when the master of the house will come...” “And what I say to you, I say to all; watch!” “Waiting” implies a kind of passive openness to ‘whatever’ happens; “watching” however implies that something specific and recognizable is about to occur – something that requires our focus.

The word “Advent” is from the Latin meaning “the arrival” or “the coming.” For Christians, Advent takes on special significance in two tenses: the past and the future. On one hand, Advent is the liturgical celebration and remembrance of the past coming of Jesus Christ as an infant in a manger in Bethlehem. We celebrate him as the ‘Word made flesh’, the ‘light to the nations.’ He is the embodiment of hope for God’s salvation; the promised One for whom the world had longed and waited for centuries. And we Christians affirm that he did arrive; he and lived and died, and was raised again by the will and power of God.

But then Jesus - this ‘Word made flesh’ - foretold of the coming again of what he called, the Son of Man – the one not wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger – but coming and arriving in the clouds with great power and glory.

In the opening verses of our text, Jesus said that there would be signs before the arrival, the coming of the Son of Man: The signs would be apparent in the sun, the moon and the stars; for the sun would be darkened, the moon would not give out its light, and stars will fall from their place – hence there will be pervasive darkness. There will be distress on the earth – conflict among nations, wars and rumors of wars. Then he said, just before he bids his disciples farewell, “If I go away, I will come again.”

It is to statements and imagery like these that we give lengthy theological terms like “eschatology” or the “parousia”, meaning the last things, or the second coming. But as Albert Schweitzer argued back at the beginning of the 20th century, there are numerous eschatological dimensions deeply imbedded in a great deal of

what Jesus said and who he was. The Christian story is saturated with the promise of Christ's return.

In the early days of the faith, when Christians were fearful of identifying themselves publically as followers of Christ for fear of persecution and arrest, they would greet each other on the street with the term "Maranatha" – meaning, "the Lord Comes." It was both a code word and a word of encouragement. In the Apostles' Creed which we recite as a part of our liturgy most Sundays like today, we corporately confess, not only belief in God and His Son Jesus Christ; We also affirm that we believe that, "... he shall COME AGAIN to judge the quick (that is the living) and the dead." The Apostle Paul reminds us of the promised return of Jesus in the words he shared in I Corinthians which we call the Words of Institution for the Lord's Supper: "As often as you eat this bread and drink from the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death UNTIL HE RETURNS." The Lord's Supper – Communion – is to be a foretaste, a preview of that great eschatological heavenly banquet of which all believers shall partake anew with the returned Christ and with all who have gone before us into the kingdom that is to come.

So the promised return of the Risen Christ is clearly apparent in our teachings, our worship, and in our sacraments. Yet in this day there is has arisen a certain fear of what that return will bring, making us more than wary of it. Maybe that is because we are too much a part of this world. Or maybe it is because the world is too much a part of us. So maybe that is precisely why Jesus is so deliberately vague and imprecise when he talks about the end time and his return. "No one knows the day or the hour," he says.

We have been waiting for the return of Christ for over 2,000 years, and longer we wait, the more removed we are from the promised return, hence the more we forget that promise. We may be wary because the prospects of a 'second coming' have a way of devaluing all the things we have come to value in this world: power, money, status. To put a tone of urgency in the promised return and our active watching for its fulfillment, has a way of putting all the things we value in this world in jeopardy. So we don't want to think about passive waiting, and we certainly don't want to be involved in "active watching."

Our situation might remind us of the story of the three assistants to Lucifer (Satan) who were comparing notes about how to convince humans that God does not exist. The first assistant said, "I tell people there is no God, but that doesn't work – they look around at the intricacies and marvels of the universe and they sense there is a God – a Maker." The second assistant said, "Well, I tell them there is a God, but I also say that the Bible is merely an historical book, and is not

all that accurate.” “But that doesn’t always work either, for they read those passages with their wisdom and guidance for life, and they know it was inspired by some Being greater than mere humanity – so there must be God.” The third assistant said, “Well, I use an entirely different approach. I tell them there is a God, and I tell them that the Bible is the inspired word of God.” “Then I say, ‘But what’s the rush serving God? Sit back and relax ... you can be faithful tomorrow... Procrastination – putting off any thought for the promised return of Christ or his coming kingdom ... that works almost every time.’”

That tendency for procrastination is why Jesus Christ our Lord entreats us to always “actively watch” – to be vigilant. We are to accept the higher values of his coming kingdom – to get and keep our lamps ready, and to begin to live those values now. Active watching brings far more reward to us than simply passive waiting. Advent is a time of the year for a vigil. And the promise is that those who actively watch for Christ in this season will be rewarded with a quiet, special revelation of his presence, for he continually returns by his Spirit as the Long-expected one of God.

There is a nursing home in Illinois which has a saying etched over the entry door which greets all visitors, saying, “Come in the evening; come in the morning; come when expected; come without warning; ... but come!” If you have every visited a nursing home you know the essence of what that saying means. The hallways and beds are filled with people who know all too well the difference between passive waiting and active watching. Most of their days are filled with passive waiting – waiting and hoping for someone to come along to pay just a little attention - to share a little time. But some days, when there is the promise of a visit from a family member or a church member or a friend, then their attention gets heightened with a bit of excitement and a touch of joy as they “actively watch.” What those visitors bring with their visible presence, whether vocalized or not, is the message, “I have come, because I love you; I care for you.”

Advent is a time when we in our needful, dependent condition are to actively watch for the Lord to come. When Christ appears either as the babe in a manger, or by the Spirit, or on the clouds in glory, the message will be the same, “I have come, because I love you; I care for you.” So Advent is that event which has already occurred in the past, but it is also that which draws us into the future.

Actually, after further consideration, Advent does have a present tense to it as well. In the season of Advent as we active watch, we are to look for the signs of his promised presence which are right around us. Christ gives us ample opportunity to discover his presence in each moment. He said, “Come, O

blessed... inherit the kingdom.... for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and in prison and you visited me....” “Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it unto me.”

So Advent is every moment when we look for his arrival, his coming through those who come to us as the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and prisoner. Active watching means greeting Christ through giving to the needs of those who are broken, hurting, and living in one of life’s darker places. It is to the least of these, who are members of his family that we can offer the greeting, “Maranatha” – “our Lord comes.”

English theater director and playwright, Ron Eyre, traveled the world and while so doing, interviewed leaders of all the major world religions as he observed their practices and rituals. He also questioned numbers of laypeople of these varying faiths as to how their faith influenced their lives. He interviewed Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians.

One of the questions later directed to Eyre upon his return was, “But aren’t all these religious faiths really saying the same thing?” He responded that in his observations it would seem that all the faiths were climbing the same mountain, but using different climbing gear. But then he added, “But the Christian faith is different and quite unique from all the others.” “While the other religious faiths are passive; the core of the Christian faith is an active anticipation of the Divine.”

Advent is the season when we are to be reminded and celebrate the fact that God has already come into our world through the Christ Child. But it is also a season when we are to stay constantly alert and focused for the Lord’s appearance among us again. The God who has come to us as Emmanuel - God with us - keeps coming to us.

So we are called not to simply passively await his arrival this Christmas – We are to actively watch for his arrival in the world and in our lives. He has told us pretty clearly: “what I say to you, I say to all... Watch!” So our prayer is to be, “Come in the evening, come in the morning; come when expected, come without warning; but, come Lord Jesus – come!” Amen.

