

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

November 27, 2016

“Watch”

Advent 2016, part 1

Matthew 25:1-13

Call to worship: Psalm 122:1 - I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

Prayer

Happy New Year! I know, it's not January 1st yet, but today is the first day of the Advent season. We changed the paraments to purple (those banners on the table and the lecterns.) We lit the first Advent candle. We sang a carol this morning. Most of us are thinking: Christmas is coming. And you are right.

Advent is a season of preparation – but not just for the holiday with the reindeer and the manger. During Advent we prepare for Jesus' second coming. Granted, that's not a topic that we mention often in our Methodist churches. But the Bible indicates that the first Christmas – when Christ appeared as the incarnate, God-in-the-flesh Savior – the first Christmas was the beginning of a period that will end with Jesus' return to earth. Advent is “a period of extended reflection on the *end* of – or the *fulfillment* of – all things through Jesus Christ.” (Taylor Burton-Edwards, www.umcdiscipleship.org) Christ will come again. That's what Advent is all about. This is our annual reminder to watch.

Thirteen times in the gospels, Jesus commands his disciples to stay alert, to watch. (See Matthew 24-26, Mark 13-14, and Luke 12.) Now, “watch” is a funny word. Most people think a watch is a little thing to wear on your wrist to tell time. But why is a “watch” called that? We don't watch it. We look at it. Then

we look away...until we forget what time it is, then we glance at it again. Maybe we should call them “glances,” not “watches”.

Or we say we are “watching” TV, but in reality, we are being distracted by it. Watching TV (or any video screen) dulls our senses, making us less alert.

“To watch,” in the sense I mean today, is more like watching for falling stars, or watching when hunting. Something might happen. You expect it to happen. You just don’t know when. And if you are vigilant, it pays off.

(PICTURE) I once visited Rothenberg, Germany, a medieval walled city, where we took a tour with the night watchman. His job was to look for trouble and warn the city. He would walk around the city at night, calling, “One o’clock, and all is well!” His vigilance kept the city safe.

When Jesus tells us to watch, it’s more like that. We are looking, anticipating, staying alert, because something might happen. True, biblical watching means actively waiting, expecting, preparing for something that is eminent, but unpredictable.

Are you watching for something right now? Are you waiting? It’s the holidays. Are you expecting a visit? If so, how do you prepare? Usually by carrying on with your daily routine, but also making sure that preparations are in place for the moment your visitor finally arrives.

Romans 8:19 tells us that “creation is waiting in eager expectation...” What is the world waiting for? The answer depends on whom you ask. Some are waiting for the right leader. Some are waiting for peace and the end of suffering. Some are waiting for terror to end. Many are waiting for an answer to all the world’s problems.

The truth is, all of us, in one way or another, are waiting for a Savior. But waiting, watching, staying alert....well, it's never easy. That's why Jesus told this story, to encourage us to wait the right way.

Jesus told this parable in Matthew 25 in the midst of a larger discourse on the end times. It all started as he and the disciples were walking through Jerusalem, and the disciples started admiring the temple. Jesus told them, "Not one of these stones will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Matthew 24:2)

So, naturally, they started asking him questions about all these end times, when things would happen. While many have speculated about when the end of times will come, Jesus pointedly said, no one knows when, except God the Father. (Matthew 24:36) Not even Jesus could tell his disciples the actual day of his return.

But he did tell them parables – stories, not to be taken literally, but figuratively – stories that tell a point. The question to ask isn't when, it's how. How are we supposed to prepare for Jesus' return? How are we supposed to actively watch and wait?

Jesus said, it's like there were ten young ladies, waiting to get the wedding banquet started. In those days, without cell phones and wedding coordinators and reservations at hotel ballrooms, the whole party waited for the groom to come with his entourage. It was like a big wedding parade, and no one really knew what time it was supposed to start.

In this story, the groom was late. Now, five ladies were wise, and five were foolish. (In the Bible, the word "fool" is used to describe someone who doesn't obey God or even believe in God.) The foolish ladies probably figured, they

wouldn't have to wait in the dark. So they neglected to bring extra oil for their lamps. These oil lamps are like the ones in Aladdin, the funny kind where you stick a wick in one end and light it. These are not your Energizer-Bunny flashlights – if you didn't bring oil, your lamp would last a couple hours. That's it. But hey, the ladies had a 50/50 chance of the groom coming during the day!

No such luck. The groom came at night. In fact, the women were asleep, dozing while they waited. When the call came, "He's coming!" they were completely surprised. The ones who lacked oil tried to get it from the ones who had it, but the wise women said, "Forget it. There's not enough for all of us. Go get oil for yourselves." So they ran off, trying to buy oil at 2 o'clock in the morning, while the groom came, took the faithful ones inside, and closed the door...locked it, in fact. And get this: when the foolish women came back, trying to get in, the groom answered, "I don't even know you." Ouch.

We know this is a parable. You probably could draw several conclusions about it on your own. What is the proverbial oil? What does the wedding banquet represent? Go ahead, have some fun. But there is one obvious conclusion here to me. When it comes to being ready for Jesus, you are the only one responsible for your own faith. No one else can "do it" for you. No one else can make you stay awake, make you watch, give you extra oil. No one can live your life for you. No one can prepare your heart to meet the bridegroom, except you alone.

Romans 13:11-14 underscores this point. Paul says, "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the

armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Sometimes it is hard to stay awake, to stay vigilant. My wife told me, her physics teacher would play practical jokes on any students that would fall asleep in class. The others would quietly line up in front of the machine that produced static electricity, and, holding hands, transfer the shock to the ear of the unfortunate fellow who happened to be snoring in class. It was an effective way to deter laziness!

The shock of being left out of the heavenly wedding banquet is worse. But the truth is, many people are living their lives with their spiritual tank on “empty.” When it comes to watching for Jesus, procrastination is all too tempting. We know it exists in real life – with homework, with projects around the house...dare I even say, when writing sermons? – but when it comes to faith, how often do we procrastinate as well? We say things like this:

- “I’ll try to come to church.”
- “I’ll get around to praying.”
- “I’ll join that small group eventually.”
- “Reading my bible? When I have more time...”
- “I’ll start being a generous person next year, when I get a raise.”
- “Faith will matter more to me when I’m older.”
- “I’ll get more involved in the church after I retire.”
- “I’ll start teaching the kids about Jesus when they’re old enough to understand.”

And the list goes on. We let questions go unanswered. We leave conflicts unresolved. We prolong bad habits. We are addicted to the thought that, "There will always be more time. More oil. Someone else will bail me out."

Look, I believe in grace. I believe in God's unmerited favor being shown to sinners. But this parable was told to the church. To the people who were supposed to already know Jesus. To those who were waiting. And they were getting tired and lazy.

You are responsible for your own oil. The faith of your parents can't save you. Not even the faith of your pastor can save you. Only you can make the choice to follow Jesus and live your life like you expect him to return at any moment. When he comes unexpectedly, will he find you praying, worshiping, and serving, or will you hold up your hands and say, "Wait, Jesus, not yet! I'm not ready!"

The Bible tells us, at some point, it is too late to prepare.

What were these women doing while they were watching? Preparing for the feast. Keeping the lights on so that others could find their way. Those without the oil were taking a chance that the groom would come at daylight and hide their laziness. Without oil, they could not light the way for themselves or anyone else.

The Advent scriptures from the lectionary are typically filled with warnings and calls to repent. Why? Because we need reminding. Christmas is about hope – we always need hope and reminders of God's love. But Advent reminds us of our responsibility. We are the Church, the bride of Christ. We have the responsibility to live holy lives and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the

transformation of the world. We are to actively participate in God's kingdom, preparing for Christ's return.

So how do we do this? How do we go around with our lanterns lit? How do we make the rounds around our spiritual city, calling, "It's 11 o'clock, and all is well!" (Or perhaps, all is not well.)

It starts with a simple decision: Follow Jesus. Don't just pay him lip service. Obey him. Following Jesus means getting right with God. Embracing all that he has for your life. Have you told God, "I'm ready. I'm waiting. I'm watching. What can I do for you?" Opening up your heart to Jesus is the best way to prepare for Christmas and live in continuous Advent. Have you found a way to connect with God? The Upper Room devotions are by the door. I'm offering a prayer time and an Advent study every Sunday morning at 9. God is calling you. "The bridegroom is coming!" Are you listening?

Another thing you can do to increase your spiritual oil supply is to get right with your neighbor. Now, maybe that means something literally to you, as in, walk down your street and knock on the next door. Or, maybe in a broader sense, your neighbors are your friends, your family, the relationships in your life that need healing. Maybe you need to be the one who asks to be forgiven. Christmas can be the perfect reason to get right with your neighbor and share your light.

Finally, we can watch for Jesus' return by finding a way to serve others. Ring a bell for Salvation Army. Fill a shoebox for Operation Christmas Child. Come caroling with the youth group next Sunday night. Help decorate the church. Volunteer at Grand Traverse Industries at their Christmas party. Help at the Food Pantry. I don't care what you do, as long as you serve the last, the least,

and the lost. Be active in your watching and waiting. Get ready for Christmas in a way that really matters.

One day God will make all things new. The final remodel, the final banquet, the final party – one day they will all be here, and we will no longer have an opportunity to change.

So keep watch. Stay alert. No one knows the hour or the day, which means we must be ready at any moment to receive Christ. Whether he comes in 100 days or 100 years, we need to live every moment to the glory of God.

Memory verse

Matthew 24:44 - “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Reflection questions

1. How do you normally prepare for Christmas? What do you do around the house? For your neighbors and friends?
2. What would it mean to spiritually prepare yourself for Jesus’ second coming?
3. In what ways do you procrastinate in life? In your faith?
4. When it comes to following Jesus, why is it important to realize that no one can make your decision for you?
5. Have you prepared your heart to receive Jesus? What else needs to be done? When will you do it, and who will help keep you accountable?