

Posting a Watch [3.29.2020]

5th Sunday of Lent

by Rev. Emilia Halstead

Jesus began, "Watch out for doomsday deceivers. Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities claiming, 'I'm the One.' They will deceive a lot of people. When you hear of wars and rumored wars, keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history, and no sign of the end. Nation will fight nation and ruler fight ruler, over and over. Earthquakes will occur in various places. There will be famines. But these things are nothing compared to what's coming.

[Mark 13:5-8]

"But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So keep a sharp lookout, for you don't know the timetable. It's like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task, and commanding the gatekeeper to stand watch. So, stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning, whether evening, midnight, cockcrow, or morning. You don't want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job. I say it to you, and I'm saying it to all: Stay at your post. Keep watch." [Mark 13:32-37]

There's an experience I've read about, I've seen on television and in the movies, and probably also heard on audiobooks and maybe even

on the radio – AND I've never experienced it for myself. Oh – wait – that's not exactly true. I have experienced it, sort of, while playing Dungeons and Dragons. This thing that I'm talking about, is posting a watch, or being part of a posted watch. Elves, aliens, cowboys, soldiers – I've witnessed them all post a watch, but I've never done it in real life. And while I know it's a little nutty, I've always wanted to actually be a part of one.

Perhaps it's because I'm a night owl, and the thought of having the night to myself, while my companions sleep is really alluring for me. Perhaps it's because I've wanted to experience the level of trust it takes to participate in a watch. Whatever the reason, I've always imagined myself taking 2nd watch, from about 11pm to 3am.

Lucky for me, Jesus is teaching about keeping watch in our scripture passage for this morning. Specifically when it's ones turn to be the gatekeeper Jesus says, “Stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning, whether evening, midnight, cockcrow, or morning. You don't want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job. I say it to you, and I'm saying it to all:

Stay at your post. Keep watch.”

This reminds me, again, of how much trust is required to be part of the watch, and the huge responsibility of the gatekeeper, in particular, to be on the lookout for Jesus return. Everyone else needs to trust the person posted as gatekeeper to sound the alarm to wake everyone up, when the very first sight of Jesus occurs, so that everyone else will be awake to experience Jesus' return.

The gatekeeper also has to be extremely discerning of what they are seeing outside of the gate. According to our passage, if a war or rumors of a war reaches the gate, the gatekeeper needs to ignore it. If an earthquake occurs, the gatekeeper needs to ignore it. If famine occurs, the gatekeeper needs to ignore it. Why? Because God isn't coming in war, earthquakes, or famine. According to our passage, Jesus' return is going to look a heck of a lot like the start of a theater stage performance. Allow me to elaborate -

When you go to a stage performance, at first there is the low hum of people talking and taking their seats, with the energy of excited anticipation filling the air. The lights over the seats are on, perhaps

muted in strength, but on nonetheless. While the lights on stage are off, or perhaps very muted, or there's a full curtain blocking ALL of the light from the stage. Often the director or a staff member of the theater will stand up to give announcements and safety instructions. It's after that - that all of the lights go out, and for a breath, or two, or three the anticipation builds tremendously...

Jesus says, "Sun will fade out, moon cloud over,
Stars fall out of the sky, cosmic powers tremble."

This should sound vaguely familiar... rather like a re-birth if you will. "First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky darkness." [Genesis 1:1-2]

All the lights in the theater are off...if there is a curtain, you'll hear it be rolled back...and then – BAM – the lights come up on stage!

Jesus says, "And then they'll see the Son of Man enter in grand style, his Arrival filling the sky—no one will miss it! He'll dispatch the angels; they will pull in the chosen from the four winds, from pole to pole."

Not only have the brilliant white lights come up on stage, but they've come up on the glittering, shiny, exciting finale! Think of the closing of the musical 42nd Street! (If you can't picture it, I posted a YouTube link to the London Palladium's version of it on the First Church Facebook page.)

Once again, this should sound vaguely familiar...

"God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

God spoke: "Light!" And light appeared. God saw that light was good and separated light from dark." [Genesis 1:3-4]

If you're having a hard time with this exciting and anticipatory version of "the end times." Don't just take my word for it, here's what Professor Elisabeth Johnson at the Luther Institute of Theology has to say in her reflection on our passage:

Much interpretation and preaching about the end focuses on fear and judgment—the sense that you better be ready, or you will miss out on salvation. That is not the story Mark tells, however. According to the story Mark tells, in the one who was betrayed

and denied and utterly forsaken, God worked an astounding act of mercy and grace. After two more long, dark nights, at dawn on the third day, the women found the tomb empty. The angels proclaimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that he would meet his disciples in Galilee.

So even for sleepy, unprepared, miserably failing disciples, there is hope—hope based on God’s faithfulness and not our own. This means that our watching and waiting need not be full of fear and dread. Rather, it is an active, hopeful, and purposeful waiting—like preparing for the birth of a child. It is: to be about the mission of God that Jesus has entrusted to us.

Jesus says that the troubles before the end are only the beginning of the birth pangs. The present pain will give way to new life, to a new creation. He promises to return and to gather his chosen ones from the ends of the earth. We watch and wait not because our salvation depends upon it—that is securely in God’s hands—but because Jesus has given us a mission, because he calls us to participate here and now in the new creation that

Jesus is ushering in.

To those who are saying that the corona virus is a sign of the "end times," it's not. At best it's a kick from the infant still growing in the womb. And regardless of what's happening on the planet, we each need to make sure there's a rotating gatekeeper on watch. The rest of us then need to get back to our particular tasks assigned to us, based on the gifts and talents that God gave us to continue spreading God's message and mission of Love.

With all that in mind – Who wants first watch?

Amen.