

November 30, 2014

“You’d Better Watch Out!”

[Advent 1A: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, CA: GN]

[Isaiah 64.1-9]

Mark 13.24-37

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Let’s put our New Testament lesson to a tune appropriate for this, the first Sunday of Advent! ♪ “You’d better watch out! You’d better not cry! You’d better not pout, I’m telling you why! The Chosen One is coming again.” ♪ And when we least expect him! Well, that last phrase may not fit the meter but this popular Christmas song is almost like our grim lesson from Mark. While the song doesn’t convey the dark foreboding of the passage, it does carry, despite its expectant tone, an implicit threat. If we’re not ready for Santa Claus by being good little girls and boys, something awful is going to happen to us!

The Santa-God in the song, ♪ “sees us when we’re sleeping, knows when we’re awake, knows when we’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake” ♪ (or for God’s sake?). Just as in the famous cold war novel 1984, the Big Brother God, is watching us! While the song is intended to be about someone who benevolently rewards good behavior, it implies another, grimmer fate, because if we’re bad little boys and girls . . . the Santa-God judges and punishes us.

In this decidedly un-Christian Christmas song the emphasis is on punishment and reward rather than on repentance and forgiveness, reflecting the dark mood of our passage from Mark. Both the song and the gospel lesson say we’d better shape up—either because Santa’s coming or Jesus is returning—or else we’ll be shipping out for a hot place reserved for the naughty ones among us. ♪ We’d better watch out! ♪

Jesus’ words in Mark sound a stern note of alarm, like some night-time battlefield where the sentries are warned to be vigilant under the threat of imminent attack. Because Mark and his church are convinced that Jesus is returning suddenly and soon, he writes in apocalyptic language to alert the community of faith, in much the same way as frustrated parents warn their misbehaving children

that there'll be no presents this year unless they straighten up.

Whether it's as sudden as a cataclysm or as unexpected as a thief in the night or as random as one being taken while another is left behind, one thing is certain—the coming again of the Chosen One. Not to know the exact time of his arrival is OK, but not to expect him and thus not to prepare for his coming, is quite another matter! ♪ We'd better watch out! ♪

The gospel lesson today is a call to watchfulness. We may live to be 100 years old, or we may not make it home from church today. Mark wants to shake our complacency out of us. We can think of three examples of our illusion of peace and security. 1. The city of Pompeii was captured forever in a moment of time by the volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D., only a few years prior to the time Mark wrote his gospel. Was he thinking of that at the time? We've seen fascinating pictures of Pompeii on the Discovery Channel or in National Geographic Magazine of people frozen in time trying to escape, and of lovers and mothers and children bound together in eternal embraces of death. Recent research asserts that it's possible to identify those who were wealthy because their hands were full of valuables. They were caught in their last desperate act of folly by the catastrophe. To whom will our possessions then belong? asks Jesus.

2. Equally unexpected, though not as instantaneous, was the sinking of the Titanic, reminding us of the illusion people had that the great ocean liner was unsinkable. Too many false engineering assumptions, then too few lifeboats, no lifeboat drills—many factors contributed to an incredible disaster. When the hour of crisis came, then it was too late. 3. Then there were the people in the Twin Towers on 9/11. To be killed instantly was a blessing. Otherwise it was to die by fire, being crushed, suffocated, or leaping out a sky-high window. Likewise we don't know how long we have but we have the present moment—and that's what matters. We should make the most of it and Advent is here to help us. ♪ We'd better watch

out! 🎵

One way to help us understand these verses is to apply them to our own lives. Think for instance about the thin thread of life, so easily broken. Every now and then a death reminds us how fragile life is. Recall those in our lives, our families, in the life of this congregation who were untimely taken. We had our breath ripped out of us by the shock, our hearts shattered with grief by our loss, especially when it was a young one taken “out of time.”

No matter how we construe the gospel lesson as, correctly, originating with an expectation of an immanent Second Coming, the sense for most of us is of unexpected death. We see this all the time when suddenly threatened with serious illness and especially when we become old enough to read the obituaries in the newspaper regularly to see who has died and if our name is there. Now that’s old, ‘cause young people don’t read obituaries or, for that matter, they don’t read newspapers these days!

If we’re honest about it, we’d admit that the gospel lesson may scare us! It reminds us that we’re rather fallible human beings. We simply can’t achieve perfection or avoid sin. So we do our best with the very imperfect situation God has given us and we remember and trust in divine grace. That’s the bottom line is it not, to do our best and trust in God’s grace? 🎵 We’d better watch out! 🎵

If the early Christian community expected the immanent return of Christ, with the passing of years and decades, centuries and millennia, one would think we’d have arrived, at least, at a state of patient expectation. Yet the delay of Christ’s return has led many of us to a state of stuporous complacency. The apathy induced by our obliviousness and lack of concern robs us of the ability to see the vision and watch for signs of Christ’s coming. The deeper lethargy caused by minimizing such passages blinds us to any expectation of hope and joy.

Sure verse 32 of our passage reads, “But about that day or hour’ no one knows . . .,” so we’re to live our days fully and expectantly, always with the awareness of the immanent possibility of the return of Christ. We shouldn’t make special preparations, though, but rather live prepared! As good little Girl and Boy Scouts, we should “be prepared!” We should live our days always in expectation of a great surprise. Yes, of a joyful surprise!

Do we think that when 90-year-old Sarah was told she would bear a child, she could do anything but laugh? Or that when Zechariah was told his 80-year-old wife Elizabeth would bear him a son, he could do anything but protest? After all, which of our 50, 60, or 70-year-old women joyfully anticipate nine months of pregnancy, the pains of childbirth again and two or three decades of raising another son or daughter? So what is our joyful surprise?

For Sarah and Elizabeth—and, indeed, for Mary, the twelve-year-old maiden, told she would bear a child out of wedlock with all the attendant embarrassment and shame—God would do not only the impossible but the impossible would be a blessing and a joy, a joyful blessing, not just for the child-bearers but for all who would follow their sons—Isaac, John and Jesus. Indeed, it has been said of our passage that while the story is used as a vehicle to warn of the general need for watchfulness . . . the coming of the Chosen One is . . . a joyous . . . event for Christians. ♪ We’d better watch out! ♪

There’s another way to look at this passage which also directs it to us personally and in a way that gives us another understanding of what it means to live watchfully and expectantly. Let’s consider it in light of our gospel lesson from last week, the Sunday of the Sovereignty of Christ, or of Christ the King. The passage was from the Gospel of Matthew about the Great Judgment, when Jesus returns in glory and all his angels with him to judge people according to how they

served him in this life. Our service to Christ in that passage has nothing to do with what we conventionally think of as service in the church. Rather we are reminded that whenever we serve someone in need, we are serving Christ and whenever we abandon a person in need, we've forsaken the one whom we worship.

The underlying reality is that even though Jesus ascended into heaven following his resurrection and finally returns for the Great Judgment at the end of time, he is here, with us, all the time. And we know he is here, 'cause he tells us we find him in the face of the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger and those who lack clothes, the sick and the imprisoned. "I was hungry and you bought me a meal. I was thirsty and you gave me a fresh bottle of water. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothing and you gave me something to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you came to visit with me." "Oh, Lord," we ask, when did we do any of these things?" "Whenever you did it—or do it—for any my sisters and brothers who are poor and needy, outcast or dispossessed or who are untouchably afflicted or have been incarcerated, you've done it for me. And if you've passed any of these by, you've given up on me!"

In this case, what "We'd better watch out" means is that we must look expectantly and hopefully, compassionately and lovingly for Christ among us in the present. We must not ignore those who are desperate among us in the here and now while we wait for the eventual cataclysm and glory of the coming of the Son of Man. ♪ We'd better watch out! ♪

To be sure, most of us don't look for the Second Coming of Christ with the literal expectation of first century Christians—or of those who expect Christ's return today. We understand that the coming of Christ always is, because we always live in the presence of Christ, who in every moment freshly invades our present—in the poor and needy—and so is here, redeeming our past, forgiving

our present and giving us hope for the future and thus new life, however discouraging the world we live in appears to be.

In the cycle of the church's liturgical year, which we begin again today, on this, the first Sunday of Advent—and by the way, Happy New Year!—we celebrate and reaffirm again the unceasing quality of Christ's "comingness" and his presence in the Advent and Christmas seasons. ♪ "We'd better watch out!" ♪ We live in constant expectation of great surprises and delightful gifts, anticipating wonders that descend like angels. For Christ, who always is, comes afresh, anew and again with the renewed promise that our plight of darkness and sorrow, our ways of death and despair are being converted into places of light and life and are being transformed into the freshness of hope and joy. Amen? Then come, Lord Jesus! ♪ "Jesus Christ is coming to town!" ♪

*AMEN!*