

"Watching and Waiting"

Mark 13:24-37

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Let me begin by saying I'm happy to see how you've all survived "Black Friday" and "Cyber Monday"- what is deemed to be the official kick-off to the CHRISTMAS SALES season. And what I mean by that is not "survived" in some METAPHORICAL sense but I mean survived quite LITERALLY- you were not mangled or even killed in the process of purchasing a gift for someone. You see, bargain hunting has turned into a blood sport these days as it's not uncommon for shoppers to become violent "like sharks during a feeding frenzy" in their attempt to snag the best deals. Just a couple years ago, at a Wal-Mart in Houston, Texas, police had to intervene after a fight broke out following a scramble for DISCOUNTED FLATSCREEN TVs. Videos of the altercation showed shoppers lying on the ground atop their TVs in an attempt to prevent OTHER people from buying them. Sheriff's deputies were called to ANOTHER Wal-Mart in California after punches were thrown between two women over who was going to get- A BARBIE DOLL!

Fortunately, it didn't turn out as tragic as it did when a 34-year-old worker at a New York Wal-Mart was killed after a throng of about two thousand shoppers broke down the doors, knocking him to the ground as he opened them. Dozens of store employees trying to fight their way out to help the man were ALSO getting trampled by the crowd. Witnesses said that even as the worker lay on the ground, shoppers streamed into the store, stepping over him. When the store announced everyone had to leave, that an employee had DIED in their mad rush for sale items, people were yelling "But I've been on line since yesterday morning" and KEPT on shopping. At least four other people, including a woman eight months pregnant, were taken to hospitals for minor injuries. Where we might expect such occurrences at a European soccer match, who would suspect it in a NEIGHBORHOOD DEPARTMENT STORE? And for WHAT- in an effort to get a cheaper 48-inch flat-screened television set or to save a few extra dollars on a pair of over-priced sneakers?

The fact is that in our "instant" society where everyone demands immediate gratification for their insatiable wants, this inability to wait and demonstrate patience has become a huge problem. There is a growing field called "queuing psychology" in which businesses are studying how best to turn the frustration of waiting-in-line into a more POSITIVE experience. Researchers are trying to understand what it is people are thinking and to make sure that they're kept pacified as they move through them. Ways are being studied to cut down the time people wait at airports, fast-food restaurants, or post-Thanksgiving midnight sales, and to possibly make it entertaining for persons. For instance, the Walt Disney Corporation employs more than seventy-five industrial engineers to help the company with queue management at its various theme parks around the world.

I'm sure if you were to itemize your time by keeping a log of your various movements throughout the course of a 24-hour period, you'd be shocked by the amount of time spent just "waiting," how it comprises such a central part of our lives. You wait to use the bathroom when you first get up in the morning. You then wait for the car to warm up and then find yourselves

forced to wait in traffic just to get to work, a process that is repeated on the way back home in the evening. You stand in line to buy groceries or while making your Christmas purchases. When you have questions because the item you just bought doesn't work correctly, you dial customer service only to wait on the line upwards of an hour or so- and THEN to discover that the voice on the other end is either a computerized recording or some representative based half-way around the world speaking in a language you can't even UNDERSTAND. Maybe Woody Allen WASN'T making a joke when he said that 80% of life was simply showing up.

This morning, as we continue our trek towards Christmas with the lighting of the second Advent candle, we are reminded that "Advent" begins with just THAT- with "waiting." Yes, our children and grandchildren are already in their "I CAN'T WAIT" mode with three weeks to go before Santa arrives. In MOST years, retailers and shopkeepers "CAN'T WAIT" for the "bottom line" to materialize, that is, for profits to offset the losses made the rest of the year. However the sad fact is that THIS year, due to the pandemic, most businesses—especially SMALL ones—will LOSE money and many even CLOSE FOR GOOD as more people stay home and order items ONLINE, INSTEAD.

Of course, as Christians, we are no different- we wait for things just like everyone else in this world. However, we ALSO wait for something ENTIRELY DIFFERENT, something MUCH MORE than the arrival of the UPS man with that package you just ordered or to open that special gift under the tree with your name on it. The REAL present that awaits us this season is when we open our hearts and wait for the coming of the Lord in our spirits, a gift we can easily be distracted from amid all the mad dashes going on around us. We can become so preoccupied with having to be the first in line to claim the latest fad doll at Toys R Us or to purchase the newest kitchen gadget at Bed, Bath and Beyond that we overlook the REAL "reason for the season"- the coming of God into our world through the birth of his son. It is for this reason that Jesus warns his followers, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come...or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!"

The fact is that the Bible has ALWAYS been about "waiting." A common theme in the Old Testament was that of the "watchman." This was a person who remained atop a high tower to watch over one's fields to protect them from thieves who would sneak in and steal crops. But the watchmen also patrolled the city walls to alert others in the event enemy forces would try to attack and seize it, often in the dead of night. They were to stay awake, to remain alert, for the greatest sin for any watchman was to fall asleep while on duty. Because of her continued disobedience, God allowed his people--the Israelites--to be conquered and RE-CONQUERED with her inhabitants taken into exile. But God assured them that he would not leave them there as he raised up one prophet after another to give them a word of hope and to remind them that the day of deliverance from their enemies would eventually come. However, they had to be patient and wait, to live in continuous hope and expectation for that day to arrive which in THEIR case meant a wait of some 70 years.

Jesus continually reminded his disciples to remain alert, to not drift into spiritual lethargy so that forces in the world can sneak up on them and like a thief in the night steal away their souls. The word he uses means to be "vigilant" and "watchful." It comes from another word which means to "wake up!" It is a word one would use to wake someone from a drunken stupor,

to shake a person out of inactivity, or to slap sense into someone who is acting madly. To illustrate this point, he tells them a short parable about the owner of a house who went on a trip and left his estate to the care of his servants. They would never know when the owner was going to come back, whether at midnight, dawn, or midday. Therefore, they were to remain faithful by attending to their duties lest the owner returned unexpectedly and caught them doing things they shouldn't, or not doing the things they should.

Some of you may remember the movie *Risky Business*, a 1983 comedy that was Tom Cruise's breakthrough role. He plays Joel Goodson, a high school student who lives with his wealthy parents on the outskirts of Chicago. He CAN'T WAIT for his parents to leave on a trip so he can take over the house and do whatever he wants in it. Of course, they trust that he'll act responsibly and watch things for them, but on the first night they are gone, he raids the liquor cabinet, turns up the stereo, and dances around the living room in his underwear. Another night, he races his father's Porsche 928 despite his parent's explicit instruction not to use it. On the third day, he ends up hiring a beautiful young prostitute who after a night of wild sex steals his mother's expensive Steuben glass egg. While trying to get the egg back, he and his friends get high, wreck his dad's Porsche, and he gets suspended from school- not exactly what any parent wants to discover when returning from a long vacation.

Well, I hate to admit it but when I was in high school, I had my OWN "risky business" incident. In 1970, my father bought a new car that had just come out- a Ford Maverick which he was so very proud of which because of its sleek lines resembled more a European sports car than a boxy American sedan. Now in New Jersey, the driving age is 17 and with most of my friends ALREADY on the road, I was counting down the days until I could get my OWN license. One Saturday, my parents took the other car to attend a friend's wedding. While they were gone, I screwed up my nerve, found the keys to my father's NEW car and decided I'd start it up. After a few minutes sitting in the front seat with the radio on, I got further emboldened and so I put the shifter into reverse and backed it out of the driveway and into the street. Once there, I then started driving it up and down the street, and practicing k-turn maneuvers. At one point, while the steering wheel was completely turned, I put it into reverse and instead of heading straight back, the front-end of the car suddenly veered to the right, smashing the front quarter panel into a telephone pole. With my heart pumping a mile-a-minute, I quickly got out, surveyed the damage, and then began to see my life pass before my eyes. I could hear my outraged father in my mind yelling at me at the top of his voice, "I'm going to kill you, David!" I quickly put the car back into the garage, replaced the keys where I found them, and went back to my room to contemplate the last few hours of my life.

When my parents returned home, they were in a great mood- a marked contrast to my own fearful state of mind. The next day, Sunday, my dad didn't use his new car so I got a reprieve. But then on Monday evening, after he had gotten home from work, he called me down from my room and said, "David, I want to show you something. You may be able to tell me about it." We went outside to the garage and he pointed to the damaged front-end of the car. "David," he asked, "did you do that?" I looked at him squarely in the eyes and, like George Washington, told him I could not tell a lie- I had hit it by accident with my baseball bat. He looked at me, shook his head, and said, "David, no baseball bat could have done THAT damage. Now tell me what REALLY happened?" I then proceeded to tell him the truth, that I was in such a hurry to drive that I took

his keys and practiced it in front of the house. He said, "All right, David. I'll get it fixed but you're going to pay me what it cost to repair it- got that."

This is my way of saying, as in Jesus's parable, that when the master is absent, it becomes a time of testing for the servants. Absence becomes a trial of faith and trust, and one we often flunk. When the master is no longer home, when he places the servant in a position of responsibility involving his trust, then that's when problems often start. Liberties start to be taken, shortcuts are employed, and sitting down on the job occurs. But then without warning, the master suddenly returns and discovers to his chagrin that his faith has been misplaced, that the servant has been negligent in his duties.

When Jesus tells this parable to his followers, it comes at the very end of his ministry. He knows he is going to be leaving them soon and so he wants them to know in no uncertain terms that while he is gone, they will be trusted to follow through on the tasks and responsibilities he has hired them for. Therefore, they need to REMAIN ALERT, to STAY AWAKE, and to be EVER VIGILANT, LIVING IN EXPECTATION OF HIS RETURN AT ANY MOMENT. He promises that though he will be gone, it will only be for a brief period, that the day will come when he WILL return and issue in a BRAND NEW day for his people. This will take place, not just at the end of time when we are told once and for all sin and death will be put away and an unprecedented reign of peace and prosperity will then begin. His coming ALSO takes place EVERY DAY IN OUR LIVES, when through his Spirit he invades the fear and uncertainty of our times, pushing back the darkness in our lives with the light of his marvelous presence. Jesus will not only return at the end of history to bring it to an abrupt conclusion, he comes to us EVEN NOW, FROM ONE MOMENT TO THE NEXT, and in his coming, we find our fears surrendered to his peace, and our despair give way to new hope.

You see, Advent means "living between the times," that as children of God we live between his first coming and his last, between that day two thousand years ago when he arrived in a manger to save us and that future day when he will suddenly return to judge us. Our responsibility is to watch and to wait, to live in constant readiness and expectation so as to not be caught sleeping at our post when our Lord returns. We are to be faithful to our task and calling REGARDLESS of how dangerous and uncertain the times are, REGARDLESS of how turbulent and troubled our personal lives may be. But of this we can be CERTAIN- our hope in his coming IS SURE so we watch with anticipation. WE WATCH by speaking to God each day in prayer and telling him how much we love him and need him in our lives. WE WATCH by regularly studying God's Word--his scriptures--and reminding ourselves of his promise to always love us and remain at our side. WE REMAIN ALERT by gathering together like this on Sunday mornings and opening our hearts to God in praise and worship. WE STAY VIGILANT when we see opportunities for service and we reach out to meet them rather than shrink from or ignore them as others might. WE STAND AT LOOKOUT when we refuse to let worries and concerns over which we have little or no control take over our hearts and rob us of God's joy. Thus, we celebrate Advent by remaining at our post, by staying watchful, by being attentive and taking heed. The church has ALREADY waited two thousand years, but even if we must wait yet ANOTHER thousand or even TEN thousand years, we will not become discouraged and lose hope. Rather, we shall stay focused on remaining faithful, on concentrating on fulfilling the tasks before us, and then leaving the rest in the hands of our God. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, may we prove ourselves to be your faithful, patient people, realizing your presence in and among us when we most need you- when we are tired, when we are alone, when we are sick, when we are despairing, when we are fearful, when we are angry, or even when we are facing death. Help us to be ever watchful, ever vigilant, so that we might never allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the cares of this world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*