

“Keeping Awake” CHC 11-27-16

Last summer Betty and I found ourselves unprepared. It wasn't the first time. We signed up for what was called a Bears and Berries seminar. Led by an expert on bears we were taken to the top of Logan Pass in Glacier National Park to hike into the habitat of the bears so that we could observe them. Since bears make me nervous and engender a healthy fear when hiking on their turf, it seemed like a positive means of learning and perhaps reducing fear of such.

We show up to our destination at 7 AM. People have gloves, hiking poles, boots, parkas, all of the gear necessary for a days' hike in the mountain wilderness. We show up with no gloves, just light jackets, and Betty in her tennis shoes with a hole in the bottom. After all, it was July.

Apparently, we didn't get the message. It was cold and raining when we arrived. People started offering extra gear for the conditions to Betty as well as me. We boarded the bus and headed up the mountain. When we arrived the temperature was at freezing or below. The trail was snow packed. Someone gave Betty some hiking poles while I had to buy some in the gift shop. I never did find gloves.

Off we went into the snow and cold searching for bears. My hands turned blue as did every part of me. The humorous part is that while we are climbing in the snow looking for the bears, one appeared with her cub at the visitor center causing alarm and closure of the trail we were hiking on.

Jesus is stirring up the pot. He is throwing cold water on a sleeping teenager saying it is time to wake up! The crowd has heard him talk about the destruction of the Temple, the signs of the end of the Age, upcoming persecutions, the desolating sacrilege of the Temple, the coming of the Son of Man and the lesson of the fig tree. This sets the stage for our portion of the text this morning. Pay attention! Stay awake! Be watchful!

The season of Advent invites us to remember the first coming of Christ and anticipate the second coming of the Lord. We live in the tension. Jesus has come but he is coming again. A bumper sticker reads, “Jesus is coming. Look busy!”

These are what we call apocalyptic texts. They challenge and remind us that this world is temporal. It is impermanent. John tells us, “for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—the world and its desire are passing away...” (1 John 1:16-17). Jesus confirms this reality and comforts us by saying, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

Jesus says “wake up”! Get out of your complacency! Current political rhetoric stoking the voices of white supremacy along with the indiscriminate killing of police officers, racial tension fueled by shootings of African Americans by police officers, and the fear of immigrants and language threatening deportation heightening fears in the populace, all push us out of the complacency of the moment. Who are we? How do we feel about “the other” who is different from us? What does our Christian faith have to say about the social context we live in?

Don't become so immersed in time that we forget God is the one who holds time. Concerns for our affairs are necessary, but beware of allowing them to distract us from the fact that there is a God who is trying to communicate with us. The people of Noah's world are living unaware of the unseen reality which has ultimate authority over their lives. The ultimate issues of life and death lie in God's hands. It is God who will ultimately ask us to account for the way we choose to live. So be awake and be ready.

Jesus begins by leaving us in the tension. "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father". He assures us that God will have the last word, but when?

Martin Luther King, Jr., writing about "The World House" in his book, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community" is relevant for our time as well. Written in the 60's, he notes that "One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change. Every society has protectors of the status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions" (Homiletics, Nov.-Dec, 16, p. 40).

Jesus tells us to consider the days of Noah before the flood. People lived indifferently to the word of God, mocking the warnings God was making through Noah, oblivious to God's purposes of judgment and salvation. The status quo of eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage without regard to the pressing issues of the day or any thought of eternity created an environment of indifference toward those greater realities. One thinks of Paul nudging the Corinthians, "because we look not at what can be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Waiting for God is the hardest thing to do. As Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary reflects, "The waiting places the credibility of God's promises and our faith in them at risk. But what is faith without risk?"

He tells the story of Ernest Hemingway during his convalescence after being injured as an ambulance driver during World War 1. Doctors pulled 237 pieces of shrapnel out of his body. Six months in the hospital, surrounded by other patients, Hemingway became fascinated by how differently each war wounded patient acted and waited during their seemingly endless days of recovery. He observed some distracting themselves with entertainment, others lamenting their circumstances, and others pondering the depths of their lives. What was his observation? Waiting does not break us; it reveals us (Christian Century, Nov. 9, '16, "What Waiting Reveals", Craig Barnes, p.35).

Offering next the surprise of two women grinding grain, one being taken and one being left at the end time judgment, Jesus focuses his message, "Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming". What is being revealed in us? Or to frame it another way, is God waiting to see what will be revealed in the soul of a church or an individual that waits? (Barnes).

The object lesson of the home owner and the thief highlights Jesus' point of the importance of readiness. If the owner had known what time of night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and been prepared. "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected time".

Martin Luther King, Jr. weighs in on Jesus' admonition. "But today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant, and to face the challenge or change. The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood and sisterhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers and sisters or together we will be forced to perish as fools" (Homiletics, p.40).

There is humility in waiting and not knowing what God is up to and when God will act. The danger inherent in the interim of waiting, as we are as a church waiting for a new pastor, is that we may try to take the reins in our hands. Might it not be better for us during this time to find ways to draw closer to God whose ways are not our ways? Will we live by faith, or come up with anxious plans that can only create more hurt? (Barnes).

God has God's own calendar. History is not a squirrel cage. It is not a meaningless winding down of the clock. In Jesus' apocalyptic view God is central to the outcome of our lives and world. In fact, God controls it. We are not God, though it is not without trying. God is always at work in and through the day to day events where our human freedom is expressed in the choices we make. And there will be that last advent of our death as well as the advent of the time when God will write finis to the story of our planet.

There is an account of American prisoners of war in a German prison camp. They had built a homemade radio unknown to the Germans. Later in the war, they received word that the German high command had surrendered. The German guards were not aware. However, the Americans began celebrating, making the ignorant German guards puzzled. On the fourth day the German guards found out and fled. The waiting was over.

Might we not apply this to Jesus' assurance that history lies in God's hands? Is he not inviting us to act on the good news we say we believe, that in life and death we belong to Jesus Christ? Keep awake and be ready. Nurture trust and faith with one another, pray together, quell the fear and anxiety through living as Christ calls us to live, reflecting his life and values in our actions. "What is faith, after all, but believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse?" (Phillip Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.221).