

“Getting Ready for the Right Thing”
Matthew 24:36-44
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You may be excused for hearing tonight’s this passage and its encouragement to “be ready” for the coming of the Son of Man and being a bit confused. After all, it clearly says that “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” And then there are those examples of the poor suckers in the field and at the grinding stone who are left behind while those standing right next to them are “taken away” even though there is no discernable difference between them. And yet, the disciples are told to be ready. It sounds like that old saying about being all dressed up with no place to go. To tell you the truth, it sounds stressful and exhausting. It is one thing to be ready for something that happens, but it is another to wait and wait, tense and on the lookout, and then to wait some more. Sounds like a recipe for waiting burnout. At least in Minot, North Dakota.

Minot, North Dakota is the location of one of the United States Air Force bases that are in charge of operating many of the land-based nuclear weapons in the US arsenal. This is where some of the men and women of the Air Force are charged with hunkering down in missile silos awaiting a presidential order to fire their weapons of mass destruction, should the need arise. It’s always been a stressful job, but now it seem to be even more stressful according to a new study

that cites heightened levels of misconduct like spousal abuse and says court-martial rates in the nuclear missile force in 2011 and 2012 were more than twice as high as in the overall Air Force. The people working in these silos report a very great sense of frustration and aggravation, heightened by a sense of being unappreciated, overworked, micromanaged and at constant risk of failure. After all, if they make a mistake there are pretty grave consequences. These men and women are their nation's sentinels, ever watchful, but paying a price.

The study notes several reasons for the increase in stress, but the most interesting one for me was the ever-increasing sense of purposelessness they felt as time marched further away from the Cold War and left their missiles with an ever-decreasing likelihood of ever being used. Not that they want to fire them, but with current military attention being directed more to terrorism and cyber attacks, those waiting in the silos have the added feeling of being left behind themselves, despite the good news that a nuclear holocaust is no longer the threat it once was. The irony is that the result is a level of burnout that increases the possibility of a catastrophe. As one service member said: "We don't care if things go properly. We just don't want to get in trouble." Not much of a way to live.

In the days in which Matthew's Gospel was written, there were likely those who were beginning to feel some of that burnout. Christ had said that their generation would not pass away before his return, and yet the waiting continued, their vigilance constant, just as he had commanded. The early generations of

Christians had trouble sustaining their readiness since the world was going about its business but Christ apparently wasn't minding his. The Apostle Paul's letters speak to this challenging period of waiting. And on and on it has continued, and each year, each Advent, we grow more and more restless, perhaps with our morale dropping and our fear of making a mistake rising – are we being faithful enough? We get burned out on waiting, on being ready for Christ. Our lamps have been lit, but our hopes have not been fulfilled. And so our attention wanes. And so our anxiety rises wondering whether we will have made a mistake and be the one that is left behind in the field. Not much of a way to live.

If you want to know why one was taken and one was left, it is because one was watching for the signs of the times and the other was watching God; one was ready for the earthquakes, wars, and famines and the other was ready to lend a hand; one was vigilant about the increase of lawlessness and the other was vigilant about helping widows and orphans; one was worried about whether he or she would be judged a sheep or a goat and the other just got on with the business of being a sheep. Yes, that taking and leaving of people in the field and at the grindstone was not about, as some have pictured it, the rapture, when Christ swoops down and carries the good people off to heaven, but rather, it was his way of describing the sorting of the faithful from the less faithful, the judgment between the sheep who had acted righteously by feeding and clothing and visiting, and the goats who cried, “Lord, Lord! When did we see you hungry and thirsty and

not give you water or feed you?” only to hear “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to the least of these you did not do it to me.” Those left behind will be the ones Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’ ”

It occurs to me however, that what makes the waiting seem like a burden rather than a joy is that we are being vigilant about the wrong thing. From the very beginning, Jesus’ disciples asked for a sign of his coming, that they might watch for his return. And he gave them a lot of things to look for, earthquakes and wars and famines, and persecution, and the darkening of the sun and the moon, and stars falling from heaven and even trumpet calls, a whole bunch of things they could do nothing about except wait. But then he adds what seems to be that burnout factor, in our passage tonight, that no one knows when all that stuff is going to happen, and that it will be like a thief in the night, and you’d better be ready. And if it burns us out it is because we have missed the point of his teaching. You see, we are not really to be on the lookout for the signs but rather to be watchful for opportunities to serve, and for experiences of grace, and glimpses of the kingdom in our midst. That is where we’ll find meaning in the waiting, rather than burnout.

Most of us, however, operate like a certain old man who told his story like this: “When I was a boy,” he said, “we had a schoolmaster who had odd ways of catching the boys. One day, he called to us, ‘Boys, I must have closer attention to your books. The first one of you that sees another boy idle, I want you to inform me, and I will attend to the case.’ ‘Ah!!’ thought I to myself, ‘there is Joe Simmonds, whom I don’t like. I’ll watch him; and, if I see him look off his book, I’ll tell.’ It was not long before I saw Joe look off his book; and immediately I informed the master. ‘Indeed!’ said he. ‘How do you know he was?’ – ‘I saw him,’ said I. ‘You did! And were your eyes on your book when you saw him?’ I was caught and I never watched for idle boys again.”

Keeping our eyes directed in the right direction of doing good, and seeking grace and building the kingdom is what will keep us awake so that the thief will not enter. This is the Apostle Paul’s insight that “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 quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” This is being ready for the right thing, and it will earn us not only a happy Advent but also the assurance that we have a place at Christ’s side when he does come.

I want to conclude tonight by telling you about the photo which is the background of our PowerPoint tonight. This photo of a homemade Advent “wreath” was taken by my high school friend Judy Binkley, and she’ll be using it this year. Maybe you can’t see it too well, but there are four tealights in a row with a Christmas cactus in bloom at the end. What you also can’t see in the photo is how much that cactus means to Judy this year. You see, it was given to her just about a year ago by her friend Christine, the day before Judy’s surgery for a brain tumor. Now the Christmas cactus is a hopeful houseplant. As the name suggests, it blooms right on schedule around Christmas every year, and last year it gave Judy something to look forward to, to focus on, as she prepared for her trip to the hospital. And all went well for her. Judy survived her surgery last November and enjoyed the December flowers, and she’s enjoying them again this year. But her friend Christine is not. You see, Christine lost her battle with cancer and died in August of this year, and in her memory, Judy is using that same Christmas cactus in her process of getting ready again this year for Christ’s coming. What is poignant for me about this photo is knowing that surely Christine must have been in the midst of her own health struggles when she offered this gift, and yet found the grace within to offer such a thoughtful gift for someone else who needed it. She could have been so focused on herself and her own future that she might have missed the opportunity of this kind of being ready, the kind I believe Christ had in mind when he told the disciples about how to wait for his coming. If the gift she

gave my friend was any indication of how she lived her life, I have no doubt that Christine suffered no burnout in the days leading to her death, her time of waiting to meet Christ, because she lived ready – ready to love, ready to care, ready to share even in the midst of her own pain. May we all live such a life this Advent and beyond. Amen.