

12/04/16 - Second Sunday of Advent

“Watching for the Lord, Watching Ourselves” - Rev Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Joel 2:12-13, 28-29; Luke 11:11-13

Last week, the first Sunday of Advent, we talked about Waiting - human and spiritual waiting. This week, we look at Watching. When we wait we are watching, we are expecting. Next week, we will discuss Wondering. Once we begin to see things, we wonder about them. We become genuinely interested in things, ideas, people. It is how we become a Welcoming presence for new life and new ways of being, which is the theme of our last Sunday of Advent.

So today we are considering what it means to Watch for the Messiah, to watch and bear witness to the time of waiting. What are we looking for and how do we watch with awareness and compassion?

Watching from an Advent point of view means we are not just a passive slate upon which images and thoughts from ourselves and the world pass. Instead, Watching in Advent is composed of three elements that guide our anticipation of the coming Christ. Those three elements are Grounding, Awareness, and Capability.

1. GROUNDING

For a long time, my personal philosophy is that I need to know the ground upon which I stand before I can make statements about the world around me. And so, I see myself a little like a small pine tree on a mountainside - exposed to the world, rooted in a particular place, and reaching out from that particular exposed place. Where we have grounded our ideas about the world, ourselves, and the people around us will influence how we see and act towards those people, towards ourselves, and towards the world.

From a Christian perspective, our grounding is not like standing on a cement floor, or an immovable place of earth. In my image of the little pine tree, mountainsides shift and slide, water, wind, and snow moves over it and sculpts it over time. The ground changes.

Another helpful image is like the deck of a boat or ship. Several years ago, the son of our dearly departed friend Bob Anderson died. Robert, Jr. requested a burial and funeral at sea. And so the day came in July a couple years ago. A funeral at sea, legally, is done in international waters, which one reaches halfway between here and Vinalhaven. We got on a lobster boat down at the marina and, inside the harbor, the waters were calm. They were a little choppy as we passed the edge of the Owl's Head Lighthouse. By the time we reached international waters, the wind had picked up and we were going over 6-8 foot swells.

Many of you know way more about unsteady seas than I do, but what I noticed at that time were all the things that grounded me. I was on a solid boat with a solid deck. I could see land. The boat was captained by someone who had seen much worse and navigated the waters with calm and confidence. I was grounded, even at sea, or so it felt to me.

This is the sensibility Joel is pressing us toward. God may be unchanging in theory, but the ground of God moves with the waves and unsteadiness of our lives. This is what Joel is doing in our verses today - grounding us in God. **pg 847**

your God...is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. (2:13)

This is the deck of our boat, our grounding as we Watch for the coming Messiah.

There is also an anticipation in our watching. While our grounding may move with us and we have confidence in our Captain, our Shepherd, we also know something is coming. Change is in the air. And so, we wait on the promises of God, while being grounded in God's steadfast love. In the case of Joel's prophecy, we await what the coming Messiah will give us - The Holy Spirit. We watch for something we know is coming, even if we do not know what the Spirit is like:

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I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

2. AWARENESS

The Prophet Joel is doing an interesting thing in his words today. He is telling the Israelites to remember their grounding in the Lord. At the same time, in remembering our grounding in God, we become aware of what God is doing around us and for us. But notice that Joel presses us inward in our reflection. Watching, becoming aware, waking up - if you will, means noticing what is going on within ourselves.

even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, (2:12-13a)

We are called to rend our hearts, not our garments. So much of our lives are focused externally - what does she think of me, they must be upset with me about something, what did he mean when he said that, look at how he is dressed, does this shirt match my pants. Advent, so often, focuses us externally - the baby in the manger, what is coming on December 24th, what are the things I need to get for other people, what will I get from other people. We do all our Watching *out there*. It is all outside ourselves. God, though, demands an internal focus. And so, when we return to God, we are really returning to our selves, to what is inside us.

This is a rigorous thing, the call to self-awareness, watching the interior of our souls. We can only do it when we are grounded in God's steadfast love and presence. Becoming self-aware

is how we wake up, how we become aware of what is coming to us in the name of Christ and the Spirit. Jesus says in one of his parables, in Luke 12: **pg 75**

35 'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes;

Scripture provides many clues to what it means to become aware, to wake up, how to watch the self. In the Wisdom texts of Proverbs, we find a very short prayer, in Proverbs 30¹: **pg 612**

*7 Two things I ask of you;
do not deny them to me before I die:
8 Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,
9 or I shall be full, and deny you,
and say, 'Who is the Lord?'
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.*

Our initial impulse is to read this as external - keep liars away from me, limit my possessions. But this is really about who we want to be. The author (tradition says King Solomon) here wants to become self-aware and awake to the presence of God. He knows of only two ways to do that:

- 1) When he asks to be removed from falsehood and lying, the author is speaking about the falsehoods and lies we tell ourselves in order to justify ourselves, in order to conform ourselves to the actions and thoughts of others. *"Do not let me live in a false worldview that does not bring itself near to the reality of the world and yours, O Lord"* From our Christian perspective, this is the work of the Holy Spirit - to teach us truth and to help us live and speak from truth. It is a tremendous challenge, is it not? Do not let me live in a false worldview. Keep me far from lies and falsehood. Let me keep watch for falsehood and lying *within me*.
- 2) When the author speaks of *neither poverty nor riches*, this is also rigorous. The wisdom here is the knowledge that when we have too much, we deny God and believe ourselves to be responsible for what we have received. This is a profound state of being because it causes all the light beams that should be focused on God and others to be focused instead on ourselves. And when we have too little, we are driven to make decisions out of desperation and despair. Poverty causes all kinds of problems for the person and the

¹ This discussion comes primarily from Rob Bells' podcast from November 6th:
<http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-125-wisdom-part-8-two-things-i-ask-of-you/>

community - out of desperation, people steal, make themselves dependent at the expense of their own will and ability, and the community becomes paternalistic and imposing. For the individual, though, if too rich we deny the presence and work of God in our lives; if too poor, we deny the laws and commandments of God for the sake of survival. Let me keep watch for where I am denying God because of all I believe I have achieved, and to keep watch for where I am denying God's law because of all I believe I lack.

So God calls us, even in God's promises to awaken ourselves to the presence of God and the coming of the Holy Spirit, as an internal exercise, as a rending of our hearts, not our garments. Jesus says: **pg 28**

⁴²Keep awake (Watch) therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matt 24:42)

3. CAPABILITY

It is only in our sense of grounding and in the wakefulness that comes with self-awareness that we begin to feel capable to the awesome tasks of following Christ. Becoming self-aware, waking up, Watching, means we become exposed to things that challenge what used to be grounding us. New ideas, new people, new experiences will seek us out as much as we seek them. This is because the walls between us and the world begin to become permeable, transparent, open when we allow a steadfast and loving God to be the ground of our being and we allow the awareness available from that grounding to come into our hearts, minds and souls. Our Watching for the Messiah and God's presence changes how we see the world.

In those awake moments, we may become aware of all the things that have kept us from God, that have broken our connection to the Holy Spirit, rather than the things that strengthen and invigorate us. In those times it can be hard to remember Jesus' words from our Gospel reading today: **pg 72**

¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?

Some of you may see yourselves as gifters of snakes and scorpions to friends, strangers, and family alike. Some of you may in fact have actually done that to friends, strangers, and family. Either the having done it, or the believing yourself to have done it is enough to make any of us feel incapable of acting on behalf of the Lord in the world. But we are all here because we have changed the grounding of our being, we are all here because we either have or want to become aware of God's presence in our being and in our daily lives. The deck of our ship moves with the waves of the Spirit. To that concern, Jesus says,

¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

The Spirit promised by the Prophet Joel, the Spirit who causes sons and daughters to prophesy, who brings dreams to old men and women, who causes visions of a God and Spirit-filled future is available to all of us. The Spirit of God grounds us in God's love, wakes us up to the presence of God's Spirit, and the Spirit of God gives us the capability to accomplish the apparently impossible. As it is often said, *God uses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible.*

What we do here, in church, is provide a place to renew our grounding in God's love, to feel the stability of our boat upon the waves of life, and the guidance of our Captain. We do that through song and Scripture and message. Here, we provide a safe place to rend our hearts, to become self-aware and wake up to God's presence among us, a place to Watch our interior selves while looking to the Holy Spirit. We do that through fellowship and prayer and silence. Here, we regain the strength to feel capable to the task of living into God's love, into the future of the Spirit which has been promised to us by the Prophets and gifted to us through Jesus Christ. We do that through all of the above and through sharing the source of that Spirit, the One for whom we are Waiting and Watching, Jesus Christ. We honor his presence by sharing the bread and the cup, the body and the blood of Christ with one another. And in doing so, we become grounded, aware and capable in our Watching for the Messiah, now, in the future, in ourselves, in one another, and in creation itself.

AMEN.