

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
“WATCHFUL WAITING”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
NOVEMBER 28, 2010
Matthew 24:37-44
ALL SERVICES

Watchful waiting involves a growing awareness of the truly needy of the world, those who wait for someone to show them the compassion of Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught his disciples that the dawning of the age to come could come at any time, even when they least expected it. As Advent people we are to live in readiness, in faith, and in faithful living.

Waiting has always been a part of faith. The ancient Israelites had to learn this lesson over and over again. Like children they were often impatient and demanding. They could not understand why waiting was necessary. Throughout biblical history, however, we see that God’s timing is flawless. God always acts in the fullness of time.

It has been said that time is God’s way of keeping everything from happening at once! If this is true, we can be very grateful. Haven’t we all had those moments when it suddenly *seems* as if everything is happening at once? But on the other hand, time is unpredictable. We must be constantly prepared for both the best and the worst of life’s circumstances.

In the scripture lesson for this morning Jesus is talking with his disciples about the future. Throughout the 24th chapter of Matthew, Jesus instructs his disciples concerning two future periods of crisis and change. First, prior to today’s text, Jesus speaks of the more immediate future, when the Temple will be destroyed. In fact, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 A.D. Second, Jesus speaks to his disciples of the ultimate future, of *last things*. The *parousia*, the coming in glory of the Son of man, will mark the end of this earthly age and the beginning of the heavenly age to come. Jesus warns the disciples of many dangers that will characterize the period before the final end. There will be worldwide

chaos and wars between nations. Messianic pretenders will confuse the people, each insisting, ***“I am Christ.”*** False prophets will also arise and lead people astray. But the gospel will be proclaimed throughout the world before the end comes. Those who endure to the end will be saved.

All of this must have been very disturbing to the disciples. The natural reaction would be to ask when this would happen. Something so cataclysmic would change everything forever, so when would it occur? History is replete with examples of the obsession to solve the riddle of when the end will be. Jesus does everything he can to remove this distraction, because he understands what a distraction and preoccupation it would become. Therefore, Jesus states emphatically that no one knows when the end will come. He indicates that he himself does not know. Only God knows. Jesus’ words have clearly not deterred everyone. There have been, and presumably always will be, self-made seers and prognosticators looking for signs, both in the Bible and in world events, as to when the end will be. Jesus’ concern, however, was how his disciples would live in the meantime.

A young girl was reading a mystery novel at bedtime. Her father came into her room to tell her it was time for **“lights out.”** She asked for ten more minutes, and he conceded. Later when he came back in the room, he saw that his daughter had turned to the back of the book and was reading the ending. He said, **“Ah, you know how it ends.”** She said, **“Boy, if the bad guys knew what I know, they wouldn’t be having such a good time now.”**

Jesus not only needed to prepare the disciples for the destruction of the Temple and the eventual end of the age, but for his own imminent death. How would his followers absorb all of this? How would they react to his physical absence? What would be their manner of life when he was with them no more? Jesus needed to assure them that when the end came he would be present to vindicate their faith and their faithfulness. There were so many things they did not know, and could not know; surely it would put steel in their resolve to know what the end would be.

The first-century Christian witness put Jesus Christ in cosmic perspective. The first chapter of John’s Gospel refers to Jesus as the eternal ***Logos*** or Word, through whom God spoke creation into being. John further identifies Jesus as ***“the true light that enlighten everyone.”*** (1:9) **Colossians** says Jesus is ***“the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. . . . He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”*** (1:15-17) **1 Timothy** (6:15) and **Revelation** (19:16) declare Jesus ***“King of kings and Lord of lords.”*** Again in **Revelation**

(21:6) Jesus says of himself, ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”***

Like the disciples, we do not know when the end will be, why it will come when it does, or how it will appear. But we know *who*. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We, with the disciples, are granted the advantage of living with the end in view. Jesus apparently believed this would be an asset and a source of encouragement for his disciples. How does this affect us? Does it dampen our enthusiasm, knowing the end is already decided? Or does it energize us to serve God and the world in Christ’ name? After all, we’ve been here one hundred years already. Can you feel the excitement for the centennial that will launch us into the next 100 years to come?

Knowing what the end will be has strengthened Christians in every generation and in all manner of circumstances. Anticipating the end has kept us as a church alert and prepared. Jesus encouraged his disciples to practice a watchful kind of waiting. Waiting can be boring and miserable if it is a mere necessity. Waiting can be the most stimulating thing in the world if you are a child before Christmas. Followers of Christ are awaiting a face-to-face experience of what we have only dimly seen. The unfortunate descriptions of the ***“second coming”*** with which some have tried to frighten the world need to be forgotten. If the *parousia* is a fuller expression of the love and goodness we have already experienced in Jesus Christ, how can we not await it with the keenest anticipation?

Consider what living with the end in view did for the disciples. First, it gave them a clear sense of what was important. It uncluttered and simplified their lives. Second, it gave them a greater sense of responsibility, not of resignation. Third, it filled them with, not merely hope, but a buoyant confidence that made it possible for them to face both life and death victoriously.

Watchfulness is sometimes a matter of life and death. The sentinel stands watch on behalf of sleeping comrades, lest the enemy find them completely vulnerable. ***“The prophet is the watchman”*** of God’s people, says Hosea. Watchfulness is not always protection from enemies, however. Karl Barth, the great theologian of our era wrote in his ***Church Dogmatics*** that the Christian is like ***“a child on Christmas Eve.”*** Because of what God has done, we wait with eagerness to see what God will do.

If you sense a divine calling from God to be an example to the rest of the world; to model moral goodness and spiritual insight, I would love to be your pastor. I

would love for this centennial congregation to be your church. Join us in this Centennial Year as we wait with eagerness to see what God will do in this place we call Park Hill.