

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Be On the Watch”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Advent 1—December 3, 2017

Lessons: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Many of you likely have seen the silly Geico commercial showing a member of the British army standing guard, with his red tunic and bearskin cap, being relieved by another guard with the bearskin cap, but otherwise in flip-flops, shorts and a T-shirt. The voice says: “Casual Friday at Buckingham Palace? Surprising!” Knowing the British, and even a member of the Coldstream Guards, that would never happen, but I have thought of that ad this week as I read through our lesson today. Gene Peterson says it this way: “*But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So keep a sharp lookout, for you don’t know the timetable. It’s like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task, and commanding the gatekeeper to stand watch. So, stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning, whether evening, midnight, cockcrow, or morning. You don’t want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job. I say it to you, and I’m saying it to all: Stay at your post. Keep watch.*”¹

The first time I remember preaching on this passage, I was preaching as a candidate for a church in Baltimore. I knew that the Pastor Nominating Committee would be present, and that I would be meeting with them after the service over lunch, but I had not met them prior to the service, so I did not know which people in that congregation were making the decision about whether to call me as their pastor. I remember that I focused on our gospel passage and the notion of staying awake and alert.

My teenage cousin drove me to the church. He was home from college and had been out with a bunch of his friends the night before and knowing that I was going to read this passage from Mark, I warned him that if he looked tired I might say: *Wake up* from the pulpit. Of course saying “wake up” was part of my sermon and my wonderful cousin was a bit surprised when I looked out at him and he carefully paid close attention and said just that: *stay awake; wake up!*

He was not as surprised as I was because there was one man sitting right up front—and remember I did not know who was from the committee—this man not only fell asleep, he actually leaned over to the extent that he was really lying down in the pew and all as I was saying: *Stay awake: Be on the watch!*

Remembering that man, who was not a member of the search committee, got me thinking about the ways that we ourselves are asleep to all the ways that God is continually coming to us and calling us out to serve God’s people. Remembering Casual Fridays at Buckingham Palace made me wonder whether we are napping away in our flip-flops and shorts while God literally is shaking the heavens—anybody else feel the earthquake this week? We don’t know when Jesus will return, but we are called to be on the watch, to be alert for God’s call to service. Remember the lesson just last week: When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, in need of clothes, in prison? When you did it or didn’t do it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

Jesus says that because we do not know when he will return, we are called to keep alert. “It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message, The Bible in Contemporary Language*. NAV Press © 2002.

Professor Tom Long suggests that a “flat-footed interpretation” of this text is: Jesus gets to the end of his discourse about the second coming and he says to his disciples: “We don’t know when this is going to happen but I’ll tell you what it’s going to be like. It is going to be like a guy who goes on a vacation and he leaves his servants in charge of his house and he says them: ‘I’m coming back but I’m not going to tell you when. I want this house in order when I come back, but I’m not going to tell you when I’m coming, so you always have to be on the watch; you always have to have the house in order. That’s what it will be like. “But listen to the poetry,” Professor Long says. “He could come back, says Jesus, at any watch in the Roman night. The Romans divided the night into four watches: the evening watch, the midnight watch, the cockcrow watch, the morning or the dawn watch. He could come back at any of those watches. He could come back in the evening. Long points out that in the next chapter in Mark it says: When it was evening, he was with his disciples and said to them: “One of you will betray me.” He could come back in the evening. He could come back at midnight. The next story is about Jesus going into the garden late at night to pray and he says to the disciples: Watch while I pray. And he prays the great prayer sweating drops like blood and comes out and finds them asleep. “Could you not watch an hour?” He could come back at evening. He could come back at midnight. He could come back at cockcrow. “Weren’t you with him?” the serving girl asks “No, I wasn’t with him.” Peter responds. And the cock crowed. Or he could come back in the morning, at dawn. The fifteen chapter of Mark begins, “And when it was morning,” they handed him over to be crucified. What Mark the poet is doing, Long suggests, is organizing the passion story around the ticks of a clock. And what it means is, if you want to know when the advent of God is, you don’t just get up on your tip-toes and look over the horizon of history, asking, “When is Jesus coming again?” Every tick of the clock has built within it possibilities of betrayal and loyalty, faith and denial. In the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, in the morning.²

We don’t know when the master will return, yet every minute of every hour of every day we are faced with choices that make a difference. God’s advent is right now this minute, if you are awake to see. God has torn open the heavens and come down and is here even now. Every tick of the clock... God is especially present around the table where we celebrate a foretaste of what the kingdom will be. There is enough and more for everyone and no one is turned away. Everyone, including those who have gone before us, everyone is welcome at this table. If you are awake, you might see them here.

In the next days, it is going to get busier and the stores will try to persuade us to buy more, to spend more, to exhaust ourselves getting everything just right. Instead, be about the work God has given us to do. Open your eyes and notice. Notice Christ in the faces we meet. Notice the ways that God is coming, every tick of the clock. Get out of your flip-flops and shorts and put on the full uniform of God’s kingdom. Keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. Be on the watch!

Let us pray: We do not know when Christ will return, so we will wait, and in the waiting, we will share hope with everyone around us. We do not know what the coming days will bring, but we will be alert, noticing all those who need the help we can provide. We do not know the opportunities we will be given, but we will keep our eyes open, so we can welcome each person as if they are the Christ. Open our eyes and our hearts dear God. In the name of Jesus the coming one we pray. Amen.³

² Thomas G. Long, *Something is About to Happen...Sermons for Advent and Christmas*. CSS Publishing Company, Inc. © 1987.

³ Adapted from Thom M. Shuman, LectionaryLiturgies.blogspot.com December 3, 2017 © 2017.