

Keeping Watch

Luke 21: 25-36

[Advent 1, Augsburg University Chapel, 5 December 2018]

I remember the first time I witnessed the guards on a blustery November night, some twenty years ago, stationed at the various entrances to the Wabash College campus, huddled in blankets around a barrel, in which a fire was burning, trying to keep warm, stopping cars as they neared campus, determining their occupants and purpose, intent on protecting their beloved college from the hated cabal from the south. I thought, what the hey is this about? Are these guys crazy? These poor fraternity pledges, staying up all night, protecting the campus from vandalism attacks during Monon Bell football game week...surely this is some sort of medieval ritual that we are (or should be) well beyond in the late 20th century!

But the more I think about this scene and what these guys were doing, the more I wonder whether there might be an important lesson for all of us in the dedication and passion they brought to their guarding responsibilities. Clearly these young men believed deeply enough in something (whether we approve of the cause or not) that they were willing to risk their comfort and health to keep watch, to stand guard, to be vigilant – and that, it seems to me, is something all of us – especially we Christians – might want to pay some heed.

There are two lessons I glean from my experiences with the campus guards – lessons that raise questions for all of us:

- Are there people/things/ideas/causes that are worth keeping watch for – this is a tough question in a culture marked by apathy, passivity, a lack of investment and responsibility – an unwillingness to be accountable for what we do and say? Are we willing to buck the cultural norm and stand for something?
- Are we willing to make the sacrifices – to give up our comfort, our safety, perhaps even our livelihoods and lives, to seek after those things, to keep watch, to stand guard?

It seems to me that our lives in the world might be genuinely transformed if we genuinely believe in and hope for something enough – and then have the courage and resolve to make it real, to pay attention, to be vigilant in its pursuit.

These are such fitting questions for this first week in the new liturgical year, the beginning of our Advent preparations. In the gospel read this morning, we have this clarion call to the faithful: “There will be signs...people will faint...there is something coming...the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory...this generation will pass away, but not my words...Be on guard...be alert...be strong.” The call to keep watch, to be faithful, challenges all of us to face the questions my Wabash story

illustrates. There is someone coming – do you believe, are you willing to stand and fight, to keep vigilant, to band together as God’s people and support each other as you huddle around the fire, keeping watch, waiting for the angels to bring you good news of great joy – for all people?

As we turn our hearts and minds to the blessed Christmas celebration ahead, we are offered the gift of these few weeks of Advent for preparation, for prayer and reflection; weeks to learn to wait, not just for the sake of waiting but because someone worth waiting for has already come — someone who calls us to give up our lives, to take up the cross, to hope for the kingdom to come; someone who loves us so much that, in spite of all our human foibles—fear, weakness, pride, apathy, you name it—gives us the gifts of faith and patience and wisdom and courage to keep watch, to pay attention, to stand guard...

In Advent, we are reminded that the One who has come and is yet to come bids us to live as people who have been saved, as those called to watch for all of the ways in which love is breaking in – again and again – in the ordinary moments of our lives in the world. Love is breaking in as God’s grace and reign is with us here and now, and for time immemorial. As we love each other, as we love the world, as we meet the needs of strangers – God is here. Are you watching, are you paying attention?

What do you believe in enough to keep watch? It is our Advent challenge. Shall we keep watch together – for peace, for our children, for a living wage, for a world that knows no hunger, for justice in the land, for a sustainable earth, for common purpose? Do you care enough to keep watch, to give up your comfort and safety – perhaps even your life – to do God’s will? There is work to be done, a promise to be fulfilled, life abundant to know and enjoy.

And so here we go – as God’s faithful people – to:

- Keep watch with our neighbors, near and far, in our common aspirations for healthy communities, fair and just lives together, compassion for the vulnerable, a home for those experiencing homelessness, the beloved community in which dignity and respect for each other inspires our common purpose; to...
- Keep watch for abundance, when the world says there is never enough; to be beacons of hope in a world where there is too little evidence to hope; to feed hungry bodies and minds and spirits with the plentiful gifts of our good God; and to...
- Keep watch and get to work, believing that the Word made flesh calls us to be the body of Christ on earth, in the darkness, in the weary world; to live as 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila charges us in this haunting poem:

Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

My friends, be alert, stay awake, keep watch - with someone, for something – Christ has no body on earth but yours. God is in our midst and calls us to wait and watch and listen carefully for the gracious word of salvation we all so long to hear, again and again. Keep watch. Amen.