

Watch

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

Our five word or less theme statement for today's sermon is, "Watch for His coming." Jesus promised to return to our reality ***at some unspecified point in time.*** He told us to watch for him. But this presents us with a problem. Jesus left us not quite two thousand years ago. Yes, we know he told a parable about wedding guests who fall asleep and miss the party when the bridegroom delays his arrival. But two thousand years? It is hard to watch and wait under the most favorable of circumstances. Would anybody call 2020 "the most favorable of circumstances"? This year we watch the State of Indiana's COVID dashboard. This year we watch the news for signs that whatever we hoped the outcome of the election would be might actually, finally happen. This year, some of us watch the suddenly good IU football team just to take our minds off of all the other things we're watching. Watching for His coming falls off our radar screens pretty quickly in times like these.

Yet the call remains: watch for His coming. But in order to answer the call we must understand what it means to watch. In some Christian traditions, watching for Jesus involves looking at the signs of the times for some sort of cosmic heads-up. "Oh look!" these folks will say, "a global pandemic, the rise of China, IU football is actually good! It must be the the End Times!" I exaggerate only slightly. Quite a large number of Christians believe watching for Jesus means staying alert to portents that his

second coming will happen any second now. With all due respect, these folks miss the point. That is to say, they miss Jesus' point when he says, "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Again and again Jesus told his followers to watch, but that they could never predict his return before it actually happens.

This is a frustrating message to receive, especially when he immediately follows it with, "Take heed, watch, for you do not know when the time will come." And now we have come to the moment to address another common error. A different, significantly large portion of Christianity has decided to give up watching at all. The vast majority of Presbyterians fall into this category. We tend not to pay much attention to His return. Instead, we tend to emphasize the ethical imperatives of God's justice and the need to hold ourselves and our communities accountable to God's judgment. These are good things to focus on; Jesus put a great deal of stress on them. They are foundational parts of the Gospel. But they are not the **whole** Gospel. The whole Gospel also includes the promise that Christ will come again. And he will execute his own judgment on all creation. And, he insists, we must watch for that.

Jesus tells us to keep watch for his return but we will never see him coming. His return has delayed for so long many Christians have quit trying to watch. How can we untangle this knot? For our answer we return to the point made a few minutes ago: we must understand what it means to watch. I believe that when Jesus calls us to watch he does not mean literally to keep our eyes peeled. He means, rather, to

maintain a state of readiness. He calls us to live in step with him. Walking with him will keep us ready enough for whenever and however he returns. This particular Advent, this particular season of anticipation of our celebration of his birth, his first appearance on earth, watching means working to maintain the bonds of fellowship within and beyond the church.

People complain about how others choose to react to the pandemic. We have maskers and anti-maskers, those opposed to government-mandated shutdowns and those who cannot believe anybody could possibly object to them. Two weeks ago I told a story about a conflict between the two sides I witnessed in a Subway sandwich shop. But today I would prefer to tell a story of one impressive way I see people caring for each other in these difficult days. Hopefully it will serve as an example of how to watch for Jesus in the manner he expects. Hopefully, it might lead us to maintain the fellowship of the Body of Christ as we wait for His return.

Carol (not her real name) manages a compound of buildings operated by a multi-national corporation. It is a seniors' long-term care facility. She has responsibility for the quality of life of 586 residents. They range from fully independent to ambulatory memory-care, to skilled nursing, in the nomenclature of the industry. She supervises a staff of nearly one hundred, ranging from cooks and janitors to nurses and physical therapists. Since the initial shut-down in late March, Carol's building has seen a total of five positive cases of COVID-19 (two residents and three staff), with just one death. That happened in early April, before useful guidance on

how to brace for the siege had arrived. This in a county that has fluctuated between orange and red on the State map the whole time.

In a phone conversation last Wednesday, Carol told me her team realized early on that their job boiled down to just two things: keeping the virus outside, and keeping the residents as connected as possible. The staff divided into two committees, each charged with one of those goals. They developed protocols and enforce them, in her words, “rigorously and relentlessly”. It will not surprise many of you to know that my mother resides in this facility. I can attest they have met the goal of keeping out the virus. I have not gotten through the front door in eight months without having my temperature taken and filling out a questionnaire longer than the bored, perfunctory quizzing you get at many places by now. Teams mist flat surfaces. Employees have been encouraged to “get in each other's faces *in fun*” to ensure 100% mask wearing. These and other efforts have suppressed the virus's progress. I speak for all residents and their families when I say how terribly grateful I am for all of it.

But this vital work is only half of the job as the management team defines it. Remember, they also identified keeping the residents as connected as possible as equally critical to their mission. This has grown steadily more difficult. Nobody watches cable news more than seniors. Nobody reads the news like seniors. As the fall surge has hit many residents have closed their doors—normally open except when they shower or sleep. Even when allowed to eat in socially-distanced, sanitized cafeterias, only a few do. Classes have been canceled. Book and birding clubs do

not meet. Since my mom moved there in 2012 I had rarely gone through the front lounge without withstanding the stares of two women who always sat in the same sofa facing the entrance. They would stare at me, then whisper to each other. In my cold little heart I called them The Vultures. I have not seen The Vultures since March.

Public health experts have cautioned us that isolation and anxiety may well take a greater toll on us than the virus all before this whole thing ends—especially on the elderly. Carol told me about several things they have done to try to maintain connections between residents, and residents and staff. Going to considerable expense, they set up those safe dining arrangements. (And I can tell you, this corporation does not normally operate at a loss!) They conduct virtual classes on using meeting platforms. (This was a winner mostly because it kept the residents more connected to family who could no longer come into the facility to show their parents how to operate their laptops and pads.) They have increased access to counselors who consult with residents over the phone. They conduct a daily riddle contest over the P.A. System with clues every ten minutes. The first resident to call the Social Director with the answer gets a free ice cream cone. Residents have to opt into this one; some of them don't like the P.A. in their rooms. But Carol says this is easily the most popular new thing they've tried.

I told Carol how impressed I am with all their work, and how grateful for its results. “Oh I just love these people,” she said. “That's the secret of working in elder care. Most of us who stay on have fallen in love. And besides, I know you know what

Jesus would want us to be doing.” She said this because Carol and I knew each other in college. She knows what I do for a living. I know she's an elder at the United Presbyterian Church in Bloomington. Her love for her people is steadfast love. It is unconditional love. It is biblical love. And it drives her to keep her people as safe and connected as possible.

Recent days have brought encouraging news on vaccines, even as increased cases and hospitalizations circle like sharks. God alone knows when we will beat the pandemic. Meanwhile, we wait and watch. As we do, find ways you can maintain and even create connections with others. Pray about your brothers and sisters in the church. Think about how to foster those ties that bind us together. But reach out also beyond our circle with that same love of Christ which we reflect on people already within it. Do it not to build your own network, nor even the church. Do it rather because all humanity needs to feel loved and connected like seldom it has in our lifetimes. And do it because the end of the pandemic is not the only thing we await.

Jesus said, “But about that day or hour no one knows...beware, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.” In gratitude for his love for us, love one another. With expectant joy, love one another. Some day he **will** return. As we wait, watch. Watch by caring for his people. Watch by walking in his ways. Watch by studying his Word. Watch by maintaining the bonds that keep us in blessed communion. Watch for His coming.