

# WATCHING THE CLOCK?

## Sermon, November 28, 2010

### First Sunday of Advent

**Texts: Isaiah 2: 1-5, Matthew 24:36-44, Romans 13:11-14**

"Do you know how to keep a secret?" the man asked his friend. "Yes!" the friend responded with anxious excitement, eager to hear what delicious private confidence was about to be shared with him. "Well, so do I!" said the first man ... and smiling, he walked away. His friend, of course, was crestfallen. But the first man certainly made a point. He knew what is probably the primary secret to keeping a secret ... that the only way to keep a secret is to keep it!

Some select quotes on keeping secrets, the first comes from the pen of Benjamin Franklin: *"Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead."* From the German poet, Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *"Whoever wishes to keep a secret must hide the fact that he possesses one."* A Portuguese proverb: *"Tell your friend a lie. If he keeps it secret, then tell him the truth."* Samuel Johnson: *"To keep your secret is wisdom; but to expect others to keep it is folly."* Jeremy Taylor: *"Secrecy is the chastity of friendship."* Secrecy is the chastity of friendship ... the friend who betrays a secret is not only being unfaithful, but unchaste. On the lighter side, we hear from Groucho Marks: *"The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made."* And from that pillar of philosophical lyrical wisdom, Miley Cyrus: *"If you want your secret kept, don't tell me."* There is an old Latin proverb: *"The dog who fetches will also carry."* You have to think about that one for a moment: Basically, if someone carries another's secrets to you, the same person will carry your secrets to the world. A Chinese proverb: *"Do not do all you can, do not spend all you have, do not believe all you hear, and do not tell all you know."* From the French philosopher Voltaire – *"The secret of being a bore is to tell everything."* And finally, another by Goethe: *"God could cause us considerable embarrassment by revealing all the secrets of nature to us; we should not know what to do for sheer apathy and boredom."*

Secrets are not a bad thing in and of themselves. In fact, the ability and tenacity and integrity of keeping a secret can be a divine attribute. Secrecy can also add considerably to the quality of life by keeping life interesting, challenging, exciting and mysterious; as Goethe implied, if God revealed all the secrets of the universe to us, whatever would happen to the drama of exploration, discovery, research, experimentation, adventure? We have secret operations in the military which do much to avoid exponentially greater conflict. We keep certain secrets about harsh realities from some people until they are mature and/or equipped enough to handle them. We keep our secret thoughts and opinions to ourselves when revealing those secrets would be neither wise nor helpful. There really needs to be no tension between being truthful and being discreet. Secrecy can indeed be a virtue, if for no other reason than privacy is a right to be guarded. It is not necessary to know everything about everybody; nor is it necessary to reveal everything about ourselves. There are times when silence is golden; you don't have to always speak the truth! There are times when our truthful opinion is neither desired nor necessary; a good rule of thumb, however, is that if our silence can be taken for approval of something of which in fact we morally disapprove, then I think we must speak up. As Goethe pointed out, even God keeps secrets; apparently, as we see in our Gospel reading today, He kept at least one secret even from Jesus! "No one knows that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father." That Day Jesus speaks of is that glorious final day when the kingdom of God will come in all its fullness, when the Son of Man comes as Judge to usher in a new heaven and a new earth ... well, the exact *date* of that Day is something the angels nor even Jesus knows.

Technically speaking, that Day isn't really "The End;" it really is about the new Beginning. But by whatever name it is named ... the Second Coming, the Eschaton, the Parousia, the Final Advent ... it is the time the people of God have longed for since the prophet Isaiah first uttered the words we heard in this morning's Old Testament lesson. It is that time when all the nations will come to the mountain of the Lord, the new Jerusalem, and all worship God as one people. It is that time when God's justice and mercy will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, when there will be no more need for swords and spears, only plowshares and pruning hooks ... for nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they have need to study war or prepare for war any more. It's no wonder Jesus' disciples wanted to know

when this Day would be, and they asked for signs of its coming. "When will that be?" they ask. "Well," Jesus says "It's a secret." Not even the angels know; for that matter, not even Jesus knows! Only the Father in heaven knows, and Jesus' Father (*unlike many earthly fathers*) knows how to keep a secret. Until that Day, Jesus continues, you followers of Mine are to stay awake and alert. Keep watch. Be ready.

The watchfulness Jesus tells us as His followers to keep is not a matter of watching the hours of some cosmic clock tick down to the Omega point. We are not to be like some hourly employee who is just sitting on his/her hands watching the clock at work instead of actually working, or just keeping an eye out for the Boss to "look busy" when he comes by. I've had jobs like that ... mundane jobs full of tedium and seemingly thankless tasks which seem to defy the laws of physics by making clocks go slower. I've also had jobs where I was so engrossed in what I was doing the time would just fly by. *That's* the kind of watchfulness Jesus implores His disciples to have ... an alertness that is attentive to our calling, busily engaged in work and service and ministry. It's the kind of watchfulness that is working as if the Boss would walk in at any moment, but not out of fear ... no, you are working as if you *hope* the Boss will come by any moment, because you love being a team player in his employ and you are proud of your work, proud of your calling, and the thought of the Boss coming by fills you with eager anticipation! And in a way, from time to time Jesus the Boss *does* come in and enter whenever and wherever His people are faithful to His words and take up His work. Jesus has a way of just "breaking" in at unexpected times and blessing your socks off when you are engaged in living life as He would have you live it! Many of you know that from personal experience, you've felt this overwhelming Presence of blessing and inspiration from time to time as you are engaged in doing the things Jesus calls you to do.

Yes, in The End there will be a grand, dramatic, once and for all Second Advent, a return of the Son of Man, a time when Jesus will return. And yes, we do look forward to that grand fulfillment of God's redemption, to the wondrous and glorious events of the culmination of God's salvation. Jesus' final return is not so much a threat of judgment as it is an exciting and glorious *consolation* ... it is the joyful and certain *hope* that God will indeed bring to completion the salvation and redemption of this world He so loved that He sent his only Son. We can bank on this: God will finish what He started; that is true for you and it is true for all creation. And that means there will be a world made new, re-newed, redeemed, a world without the pain of suffering and separation and death, a world without disease, without pain, without war, without nation against nation or religion against religion, with plowshares and pruning hooks replacing weapons of mass destruction, a world without poverty or refugees, without children soldiers or suicide bombers, a world where no one will have to submit to the indignity of being the unwitting/unwilling star of a live nude video via the airport scanners. All will one day be made whole, right, good, complete ... and that is good news. But Advent is also about right now. It's about seeing God's salvation, experiencing His deliverance, experiencing the life giving, restoring grace of Jesus who comes to us in the present, in the day we have. The Bible tells us "Today is the day of salvation." Jesus comes to us today. We do not await the final coming of an absent Lord; we prepare for the final and full coming of the One who comes to us day in and day out as we live our lives in faith and faithfulness and service.

Jesus says to us, "There's a new world coming! In the meantime, stay awake, keep at it, stay ready, continue in My Word and My works." Paul says basically the same thing in our reading from Romans: "Wake up! Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here." Paul tells us to put on our salvation and live into it and put aside the useless, futile, destructive, and frankly, idiotic works of darkness in order to put on the armor of light. Don't waste time even thinking about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature anymore; there's a new world coming!

Yes, Advent is about waiting, but it is a special kind of waiting. It's a waiting that engages the world on Christ's behalf while it waits, while awaiting that day when, straight out of the blue, without warning, Christ will appear, and with Him the grand and complete fulfillment of all God's promises, and everyone will walk by the light of the Lord as the prophet foretold. Are we living in the last days? I certainly hope so, but I don't know. Not even the angels know. But as for the secret about the day and the hour, who cares? Even now, we meet Him .... through this Book, at this Table, in the fellowship of the church, and we meet Him in one another. Even today the Risen Lord promises to break in and meet us and visit us and keep us as His own until that great and glorious day.

And that's no secret. That is good news!