

SERMON: “Keeping Watch: *Watching*”

Rev. Geoff Ross Sunday, December 3, 2017. St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church

Today is the 1st Sunday of Advent – the ‘official’ – liturgical – launch of the countdown to Christmas, but many people have been waiting/preparing for it for months. Advent is a time of waiting – for the promises of God to be fulfilled, for the darkness (sin/despair/fear) to end, for the Day of the Lord to dawn. For Centuries, countless people throughout history, kept watch – and waited – for the One who was promised, who would save/redeem God’s people, to come; promises made by God, through prophets, then the Torah/scriptures; told/retold, remembered, then, over time, forgotten.

Based on the Old Testament accounts of their forgetting the steadfast love of the God who provided for their every need, or God’s freeing/saving them from Egypt/slavery/death, or their repeated worship of idols, it seems the people of Israel were a forgetful lot: over time they even forgot – or maybe they just gave up on keeping watch/waiting for the promise of their salvation to happen; but God remembered. In fact God sent Prophets to remind the people of His promise – of His covenant with them – and to retell the story/repeat to message of hope: that, when the time was right, a Saviour would come to live among them – God in human flesh – to save them. Prophets like Isaiah and Elijah called out in the ‘wilderness’/cried out to the people in darkness/despair for the people to prepare a way/to prepare themselves/repent for His coming. And they would. But, eventually, they forgot what it was they were hoping for. [Careful what you hope for/TSE-4Q:”hope/wrong thing; hope/love/faith in the waiting” SP]

Then – when Herod was king in Judea, we’re told – the watching/waiting was about to come to an end, but first God had to prepare the way. Into the lives of an unknown – yet faithful – elderly couple, in the form of an angel, the last act before the fulfillment of God’s promises was about to take place: an “*angel of the Lord came to Zechariah*” to tell him that he and Elizabeth were going to have a baby who would play a role in God’s promises coming true. And this was news to them! Zechariah – a priest whose life was darkened by despair/doubt – and Elizabeth – a wife/life worn by disappointment – were well past their childbearing years: hope meant for others but not for them. “*Confused and afraid*” by the angel Gabriel’s appearance, Zechariah couldn’t believe what he was told; that “*God has heard your prayers; Elizabeth will have a son, and you must name him John.*” Stunned, Zechariah listened as he was told that his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit – and he would be the prophet that God had promised would come to “*get [the] people ready for the Lord.*” Gabriel told Zechariah that the child he and Elizabeth had hoped for would be the one they had been keeping watch for to proclaim the good news: God remembered His covenant and was fulfilling His Word! The waiting/watching was over! God’s Promised One was coming to save His People!

This is why the first Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of Advent Hope. The Prophets prophesied/proclaimed and the Psalmists sang of hope founded on God’s promises – promises for something better, something eternal, for peace/joy/love given as only God

can give; a hope that would save the world. This hope is the Good News of God's love/grace revealed in/through Jesus Christ whom God sent – as Paul wrote – “*to bring His message (of hope/salvation) to us*” – to save us; a message He embodied/fulfilled by coming to be with us. This is the same message that John was born to proclaim/fulfill: that the cost of Jesus' coming being with us – of His being “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!*”(John 1:29) – also meant dying for us. (Heb 1:1-4) But let's not get too far ahead of the story.

[Close/6 degrees of separation/KB close...]

With the birth of John the Baptist the end of the waiting/watching is getting close: the promise of hope meant to keep a people alive – to offer them salvation; but, like the People of God 2000 years ago, even with our knowing the story, we struggle to remember. This is why we're reminding ourselves of the promises – and of God's faithfulness in fulfilling them: this is why we're going to be counting the days – keeping watch – as we celebrate the wonder/grace/love/gift that is Jesus' coming to be with us at Christmas; but we do it knowing that (as an Easter people) His coming/birth meant dying for us. So, as we turn to the Table – the locus/intersection of God's plan/time and our existence, the celebration/re-enactment of Jesus' life/death/resurrection, the site of our hope/salvation – we keep watch/faith with all those who placed/based their hope/faith/lives in/on God's promises. Come all who are waiting/watching: come, God's promise is fulfilled for you. Amen.