

SERMON: “Keeping Watch: *Watching for the Lamb.*”

Rev. Geoff Ross Sunday, Dec. 24, 2017. St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve - 10:00pm Candle-light Communion Service.

“The end is near!”

You’ve probably seen cartoons of bearded, scruffy, white-robed, self-proclaimed prophets walking along a busy city street, carrying a sign, shouting: *“The end is near, prepare to meet your God!”* The cartoon is meant to be a joke – just as the figure would likely be to most of the people passing by on the street. Yet, what if it isn’t a joke? What if, in God’s own time, according to God’s will/plan, that promised/predicted day came? And, if it did, how would you prepare to meet your God?

For the past four weeks – in the build up to tonight/Christmas – we’ve been busy preparing ourselves – but was it for the right thing? Sure we’ve been preparing for Christmas – the day; and, yes, we remember the reason for the season – the arrival of God on earth – but your preparations were probably more focused on your shopping, gift-wrapping, decorating, baking, cleaning, worshiping, partying and singing Christmas carols. Did those things really help prepare you to meet your God? Will you be ready to rejoice as the watchmen of Israel did when they finally saw the Lord before them? If we were truly keeping watch over Advent we’d know that what we’re getting ready to celebrate is much bigger than anything we can imagine: the birth of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, God in human flesh! No amount of planning can prepare for that! And even if we did plan – do we know what/who exactly it is we’re preparing for?

The prophet Malachi didn’t exactly describe the coming of the Messiah/God on earth as a party time. There would be no shopping/decorating/Christmas cards or carols – but there would be some very serious cleaning. We’re preparing to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, the baby in the manger at Bethlehem, but Malachi doesn’t describe the coming Messiah as a baby born to a virgin. The Messiah is no helpless newborn; for Malachi, the Saviour will come as a refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap, ridding creation of the impurity and stain of sin. No wonder Malachi also issued a PG warning with his message! But Malachi also spoke of the person who would prepare the way for this refining and purifying Saviour. Speaking through Malachi, God said, *“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”* So how do you prepare the way of the Lord? Clearly much more than cleaning/decorating the house will have to happen if we are to endure the arrival of this promised/predicted Saviour.

The first place to start isn’t with opening presents but is by opening our hearts and admitting that we/you/I need a Saviour; to do this we must acknowledge the fact that our hearts/lives need to be purified/refined. In other words, preparing means repentance. The messenger predicted by Malachi was John the Baptist sent to prepare the way of the Lord by calling on the people to admit that they needed the Saviour to come and to repent. Many confessed their sins and were baptized as a sign of their

repentance/preparedness, but many others more likely listened and laughed, just as people today laugh at the sign-carrying street prophet. Others were curious, they knew what the Prophets had said; the long promised/awaited Messiah would be like Moses, or Elijah – “No” he replied, he was the “*one crying out in the wilderness,*” calling us to keep watch. God was coming, and finally, the day arrived and God/Jesus stood in front of him, in the flesh, and John proclaimed: “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*”

I know that we’re here to celebrate a birth – that’s what many of us have been keeping watch for; but we would be missing the whole point of what we were waiting for if that was all we were waiting for: Jesus was born/came to be with us for the purpose of redeeming/restoring/saving us before God by ‘taking/washing away our sins. In Jesus, the people would be cleansed and purified, not by fire or lye, but by His blood – His sacrifice. Jesus – the Lamb of God – came to take our sins on Himself; He was born to die for us/in our place. But, before we say this isn’t what we were waiting for; it is! This is the Good News! This is why the incarnation happened, it is the fulfillment of all of God’s promises; it’s what all the predictions pointed to: tonight, our waiting ends – the celebrating can begin.

So, let us come to the Table to celebrate the depth/breadth of God’s love that was incarnated in the promised/predicted Child of Bethlehem, God in the flesh, born to a virgin, into the House of David, in a meagre stable and laid in a manger in Bethlehem. Let us come to the Table and give thanks for God’s grace that came to save us. Amen.