

One Candle in the Night

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November 30, 2014
I Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13: 24-37

Mark 13:28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.

13:29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

13:30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

13:31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

13:32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only God.

13:33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

13:34 It is like a person going on a journey, who leaves home and puts the workers in charge, each with his or her work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

13:35 Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the owner of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,

13:36 or the homeowner may find you asleep upon returning suddenly.

13:37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

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Hard to believe, but we enter the season of Advent today, a season of waiting, watching and expectation. If there is one hard thing in this world to learn, it is active watching and waiting. I can remember as a child that any kind of waiting was difficult. Waiting for school to be out; waiting for dinner; waiting for the preacher's sermon to end—these were three of the most common and uncomfortable times of waiting. Yet none of these was as hard as waiting for Christmas to come. I can remember one Christmas when I just could not wait any

longer. At five in the morning I stole out to see what was under the tree. Almost sick with longing, I crawled under to see what was what. I still feel the leftover guilt from that occasion.

If there is one hard thing to learn, it is active watching and waiting. In those same years of childhood, this child learned the harsh lessons of the era. I learned that wars can drag on for no apparent good purpose, and without any apparent success. I learned in 1963 and 1968 that good and innocent people can die at the hands of assassins. Growing up in Asia, I saw the huge differences between those of us who had and the many who did not. I knew in my child's bones there was something wrong with the picture! And then I moved to the United States of America. Even here, the land of hope for the dispossessed, the children of the poor were often poorer. I learned that when ideals are inconvenient or rock the boat, they tend to be set aside.

What did you observe in the world around you as a child? Did you learn to watch in constant hope for a better world a-coming? Or as movements for civil rights and peace slowed down and became less obvious did you find yourself wondering if all your hopes had been misplaced? Did you find yourself becoming cynical or silent?

When Jesus was still among his disciples, not long before he was arrested, he addressed their hopes and fears about a changing world. They were living in cataclysmic times—times to test the courage and good sense of anyone. He saw folks jumping up and down and saying that the last days had finally come—including many of his own followers. He saw how easy it was to lose hope in hard times, how easy it was to grow confused, to let go of the plow, to lose sight of the

prize. So he urged his people not to be distracted-- either by false victory or premature despair. He counseled them to keep on keeping on, amid the threats of utter disaster. Especially, he said to them, don't grow weary.

“It's like when a householder goes out of town on a long trip and doesn't say when they are returning,” Jesus told them. “Others are left in charge, each with work to do, and the person tells the doorkeeper to be on the watch. So watch, because you don't know when the homeowner is coming back—in the evening, or at midnight, or at dawn or in the morning. Watch, so the one who has gone doesn't come back suddenly and find you sleeping on the job. And what I say to you I say to every one: Watch!”

Maybe because we Boddens and Carmans live in an old house that takes constant intervention and upkeep, I find myself caught by the image of watching over the house while homeowner—that would be Jesus—is away. It is more than sitting around. Just when you get the front of the house caulked, to keep out the water, the main drain clogs. And when you get that repaired, the oven goes out. When you get the stove fully operational the furnace needs a repair. And then there is the issue of the hole the squirrels dug in the very ancient garage roof. There's more to taking care of the house than sitting around and snoozing.

The Advent watching THESE times call for is not just about preparing for Christmas day with hot chocolate, carols, and presents. It is —more deeply-- about learning to actively watch and prepare for dawn to come, for a world about to be born. It is, spiritually, and practically, about focusing on the ultimate purpose towards which you and I bend our lives. It is about learning to mix patience with courage, mix the willingness to wait with the willingness to insist on some truth,

some justice, and most of all some hope for the household of humankind. It is active waiting: doing what needs doing, rather than simply passively waiting.

I was talking with my Dad on the phone about a year ago, about my work of ministry, and in a moment of some discouragement, confessed to him “Dad, I don’t feel like I’ve gotten much accomplished in all these years of local church ministry. MY father, never one for empty praise, received my remark with silence. Then over the crackle of the phone I heard: “Do you want me to make you up a list?”

Over the past several decades, this Emmanuel Friedens congregation, and its two original congregations before it, Emmanuel Baptist and Friedens United Church of Christ, have been able to do amazing things. Almost fifty years ago you were standing up for civil rights. In the intervening decades you founded and worked with others to build an ecumenical inner city ministry; emergency and transitional housing; stood up for women’s rights to health care and choice; insisted on welcoming affirming and being open to the inclusion and leadership of LGBT people in the life of the church.

Shall I go on? I don’t need to go on!

And yet now the present stares us full in the face. Since we gathered last Sunday the entire nation has been deeply divided in response to the failure of a grand jury in Missouri to issue an indictment in the murder of Michael Brown, a young black man shot with his hands in the air. For some of us it is tempting to simply yell. And yet, as Brown’s family has pled, it is time not so much to make noise as to make a difference. That response takes courage, patience, and faithfulness. It means individuals in every city and town in this country looking at

their own municipalities, not just looking down long noses at Missouri. It means doing some serious housework on the old structures of laws and how they are applied, to insist on a fair shake for all, including the families of young people who have lost their lives.

When I start to get impatient, when I start to wonder when the day will finally come when God breaks through into this old world of ours, I look around me and I see— I see faithful watchers each with a candle in the night. I see you— each one of you an imperfect only partially formed and yet very real witness to the new thing that God is able to do. I see you trying to live out the ideals that your weary world says are a bit too too. I see you willing to go the extra mile for strangers, or even for a good old friend. I see you. I see your revolutionary patience, your candle raised however hesitantly in the cold night of winter. And God sees you too.

There are days when we may be tempted to wish that God would give us some definitive sign, some shaking of the firmament so that the nations might come to their knees at last before the ways of a just and loving God. There have been earthquakes before—and some have read into them the hand of the Almighty. There have been storms, and some have seen in them judgment upon an uncaring or unjust nation. There have been wars before---and yet!

Jesus warns us against a premature rush to the days of judgment and days of righteous anger. He points instead to another way—the way of revolutionary patience! The way of love and justice, a way that starts with you and me.

If there is one hard thing in this world to learn, it is active watching and waiting. But it is a good thing to learn, and we are surrounded in this place by excellent teachers. Therefore I say to you what Jesus says to us all—Watch! And I say to you what the family of Michael Brown says—it is not a time just to make noise—but a time to make a difference.

Stay alert! Prepare the house—not just this church house, but the world house we share! Do the thing you see needs doing. Watch! Pray! ACT, not in reactive despair but in hope for God’s liberating justice. And may we prepare for a Christmas feast, some day, somehow, for all of humanity.