

“WATCH”
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Isaiah 7:10-14 (p. 669)

Matthew 1:18-23 (p. 933)

Jesus said to his disciples, “*What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’*” Watch? Watch for what? I want us to be clear about what it is for which we are to be watching, particularly as we begin this season of Advent. So let me engage you in a little history lesson. It begins in the city of Jerusalem about 730 years before the birth of Jesus. King Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem were under attack. The kingdom that David had managed to unite for a brief and glorious time had long since been bitterly torn in two, with Israel in the north, and Judah (ruled by David’s successors) in the south.

But now the long-standing animosity between them had broken out in open warfare. Israel had entered a military alliance with its neighbor, Syria; and the two of them had come calling on Jerusalem, weapons in hand. And even though their first attack had been repelled, Isaiah said that King Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem were “*shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.*” They were running scared.

Now, at this point that the prophet Isaiah came to King Ahaz with a message. He said, “*Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.*” That is to say: “*Ahaz, God wants you to know that you’re on the right track; he wants to reassure you that he will see you through this crisis. Don’t give up on God, because God isn’t about to give up on you. I understand how you could feel all alone, especially at a time like this. And that is precisely why I want you to go ahead and ask God for a sign, some reassurance of his commitment to you. It’s alright. You need it. Go ahead and ask.*”

Well, you heard how Ahaz responded to Isaiah’s offer. He said: “*I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.*” Why did he say that? Why was he unwilling to ask God for a sign – especially since God had already offered to give him one? Was Ahaz too proud, too self-reliant? Perhaps he thought others would interpret that as a sign of weakness on his part. He simply could not admit his need for help. Have you ever done that? Maybe Ahaz’ problem was that his ego was too big.

Or it’s possible he refused to ask for a sign because he secretly feared that God might prove to be either unwilling or unable to deliver. Have you ever felt that way? Maybe Ahaz’ problem wasn’t that his ego was too big. Perhaps it was

just that his God was too small. Whatever the reason, Ahaz would not accept God's gracious offer.

So what did God do? Isaiah told Ahaz, in effect: *"It's one thing to refuse an offer of help from other people. But when you do that to God, you've gone too far. So I'll tell you what God is going to do. God is going to give you a sign whether you ask for it or not."* He said, *"A virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel,"* a name that means: "God is with us" – whether we ask for it or not. There's the sign. There's the promise.

Biblical scholars have made much of the fact that this promise of a child born of a virgin was a veiled reference to the birth of Jesus. Now there's an understatement. Well of course it was "veiled." Nobody at that time, least of all king Ahaz, would have had a clue that this promise of a child born of a virgin ultimately referred to Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. In fact, it wasn't until he wrote his Gospel that Matthew would eventually make that clear connection.

But it seems to me there's another foreshadowing in our lesson from Isaiah. Not only does God's promise of a virgin-born child direct our attention to the birth of Jesus (which was still several hundred years in the future). The way that King Ahaz refused to accept God's offer of a sign also gives us an early clue to the kind of reception that God's Son would be given when he arrived. According to the record, Jesus' first advent didn't attract much attention. True, there were angels and a star. But only a handful of shepherds and a few wise men witnessed them. The rest of the world simply wasn't ready or willing to deal with it. But that didn't stop God from acting. As he had done with Ahaz, so in Jesus, God said to us: *"I'm with you – whether you recognize it or not."*

Now let's shift our attention in the opposite direction in history; not back to 730 BC, or even to the birth of Jesus, but this time ahead, to an unspecified time somewhere in the future; a time known by a variety of names: the end of the age – the Day of the Lord – Judgment Day – the second coming of Christ. Jesus warned us to "watch" – because nobody can predict when his second advent is going to happen.

In fact, he said, *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* But you can be certain of this: it will happen. God promised us that Jesus is coming back one day, and God keeps his promises. So Jesus reminded us to "watch" – because even though God has already given us a gracious sign of his love for us (just as he had done with Ahaz) we, too, can decline his offer, and many do. But as with Ahaz, our stubbornness is not going to keep God from acting whenever he decides to do so.

So where does that leave us? Here we are between our Lord's first and second coming. And so as we begin the season of Advent today, I wonder what it

means for you and me to “watch” as Jesus told us to do. I don’t think we can ignore a clear command like that; but how are we to respond to it? It seems to me we have three options as we watch: we can **look back**, we can **look forward**, or we can **look around**. Each option has its own unique value. But you will have to decide for yourself just how you are going to deal with Jesus’ command to “watch.”

1. The first option in this Advent season of watching is to **look back**. But when we do that, we’re often inclined to make of the Advent season a kind of memorial activity. I say that because there is a sense in which what we’re watching for is the birth of the baby Jesus all over again. Of course, many of us have done that very thing for so many years that we do it almost without thinking. Isn’t that how it goes? On the first day of Advent there seem to be an internal “Christmas clock” that starts ticking, reminding us that we have just four weeks to prepare, both physically and spiritually, to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child once again.

And when Christmas Eve finally arrives, the season wouldn’t seem properly celebrated until we had taken time to look back and recall the familiar old story of the birth of Jesus, complete with a star and a manger and animals and shepherds and kings and all. After all, isn’t that what Christmas is all about – celebrating the birth of the baby Jesus? Well, of course that’s a very important part of Christmas. But let me ask you this: When you celebrate anybody else’s birthday, does your celebration center around retelling the story of that person’s birth? If not, then what **is** the focus? What should we be watching for in this “watching” time between Jesus’ first and second advent? Are we to look back and focus on how God kept his promise in the past? Perhaps.

2. We have another option in our “watching” during this season and that is to **look forward**. Perhaps that is what Jesus intended us to do: to keep our attention focused not on the past, but on the future, because you never know when the Lord might suddenly re-appear. There are those who understand Jesus’ command just that way. So when it comes to the “watching” season of Advent, I suspect that at least the more dedicated disciples of this type probably treat Advent the same way they treat any other season. “*After all,*” they would say, “*all time is pretty much the same, because until Jesus returns we’re just marking time anyway. The Lord came once, the Lord will come again, and as far as I’m concerned, the sooner the better.*”

Now granted, there is much to be said for the hope that God will one day set all things right. But I wonder: Is it possible to become so absorbed with what the Lord is going to do in the future that we miss what he may be doing right now? I fear that for many people that is the case. What should we be watching for

in this time between Jesus' first and second advent? Are we supposed to look back and focus on how God kept his promise in the past? Perhaps. Are we to look forward and focus on how God will keep his promise in the future? Maybe.

3. But let me pose a third option. In this Advent season of watching we can look back in memory, or we can look forward in hope, or we can **look around** in wonder. I say that because I think we can get stuck either in the past or in the future when it comes to how we approach Christmas. And that can have far-reaching implications for the way we treat those we love.

Imagine a birthday party where everyone was present – everyone, that is, except the guest of honor. What sort of celebration would that be? And yet that prospect may strike painfully close to home for some people here today whose families have been separated by death. For some of you this will be the first Christmas you have to face without the physical presence of someone you have long loved. Understandably, you may feel like the only way you can now stay connected with them is either through memories of what was or the hope of a future heavenly reunion. And so you may not be looking forward to the celebration of Christmas this year; or you may be expecting it to be bittersweet at best.

The last thing I would want to do is to offer you gratuitous advice to “be of good cheer.” In fact, thoughts of “cheer” may be just about the farthest thing from your mind right now. As your pastor and friend, I understand something of what you'll go through this season, and I want you to know that I miss them, too. And that's why my dearest prayer for you is that somehow your heart will be captured by the greatest wonder of God's promise of Immanuel, and that is that Immanuel is present tense. The name Immanuel means “God is with us – right now.” And if God is God, and if God is with us, then somehow by his amazing grace, so are all those who are in his keeping.

For all of you, but especially for those for whom this Christmas will be a challenge, let me remind you that the heart of our celebration of Immanuel is not the day he was born, nor the place; nor is it the time and place of his return. Those times and places, wonderful as they are, are like nothing compared with the fact that he is present here and now. That is God's promise, and he makes it new every day.

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