



“Keeping Watch”

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***First Sunday in Advent
November 27, 2011
Mark 13: 24–37 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel reading from Mark 13 is a combination of six literary fragments woven together by the author from ancient prophetic proclamations, and the life and teachings of Jesus.¹ Each of the original stories had its own purpose, but together the six pieces that form Mark 13 serve a new, single purpose of encouraging Christians to keep watch for the Messiah’s return.²

The context out of which Mark’s gospel emerged was a difficult one. The author compiled this first of the four gospels a generation after Jesus’ death. By that time, the Roman Army still occupied and controlled Israel, and the City of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed. Numerous prophets were announcing the Second Coming of Christ, and clamored for adherents to their respective prognostication.

The fledgling faith community associated with Mark was terrified and confused by these events, and anxious for a new world to emerge—but when, where, and how? No one knew for sure. In the midst of this chaos, Mark charged his companions to be vigilant, and keep watch.

Eye witnesses of Jesus’ earthly ministry envisioned an immediate, physical return of Christ. But later generations, have understood Christ’s return in increasingly spiritual rather than literal terms, and they (and we) have understood ourselves as being part of Christ’s real presence in the world by following his example in how we relate to others.

II

One way that we can be the real presence of Christ for others, and convey the hope of Christ’s new day is through the way that we care for each other at the end of our earthly lives.

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2008, pp. 21, 23, and 25.

² Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker. *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B*. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 6.

Over a decade ago the chaplain and a group of residents at United Church of Christ related Cedar Campuses in West Bend, Wisconsin established a ministry called the "Abiders."

The Abiders are residents in this large, multifaceted retirement community who have made a commitment to insure that no of the Cedar Campus residents dies alone. These volunteers have banded together to learn more about the death and dying and grief processes, and to offer their collective ministry to others, by taking shifts with residents who are in Hospice care, when their family members are not able to be present with them.

Each Abider has his or her own way of being with others who are hovering at heaven's gate. Some sing or play music. Others knit or crochet, or perform some other type of handwork. Some others read scripture and meditate or offer silent or verbal prayers. Still others just sit quietly and hold the hand of a Hospice patient, until he or she slips away to Jesus.

Through their ministry, the Abiders serve as the real presence of Christ for persons who are passing and for their loved ones; and in so doing they reaffirm the peace and hope that Christ offers in this life and the next.

The Abiders at Cedar Campuses have won national awards for their ministry, which is lovely; but what they are doing is not rocket science. Other health care organizations could and have replicated what is being done at Cedar Campuses. So could congregations, and groups of friends and neighbors. And so could we.

III

Seeing and believing that Christ's hope-filled new day is meant for us isn't always easy. Neither is figuring out how to best serve as the real presence of Christ for others, particularly at the end of life, but the Abiders found a way to do so.

Sometimes we get bogged down in self-doubt, because we dwell too long on our respective limitations rather than our strengths; and, in turn, doubt Christ's creative capacity to work through us. Sometimes, too, we get sucked into the doom and gloom messages of false prophets or the negative vortex of the principalities and powers in our day.

But the truth of Mark's message is that God does have a better day and a better way in store for the world. Christ can and does work in and through us, in spite of our limitations. And Christ does have a plan and a purpose that is mightier than Caesar and Pilot.

A powerful example of how God can and does work in and through human beings, in and in spite of what might otherwise be our own or others contrived sense of limitations follows.

Twenty-five years ago when I was serving as a field education student in a suburban Boston parish, I was asked to organize a youth group field trip to Perkins School for the Blind.

Perhaps you have heard of Perkins School for the Blind. It's located in Newton Centre, which is a suburb just west of the City of Boston. Perkins was made famous by its association with its first deaf-blind alumna, Helen Keller.³

The occasion for our youth group field trip to Perkins School for the Blind was three-fold. One purpose was to deliver the Deacons' annual benevolence check to school leaders. Another was to attend the school's Christmas concert. And a third was, in theory, to instill in our youth a greater appreciation for the privileges that they enjoyed, including being born with all five senses intact.

Truthfully, I was a little unsettled about the field trip. I didn't mind delivering the Deacon's check. But I was uncomfortable with the assumption that the kids would automatically learn something important from this experience. I was also concerned that our students' discomfort with the experience and their immaturity might result in them offending the performers and our hosts.

In the end, I organized the field trip as requested. The Senior Deacon and I loaded the kids into his 12-passenger van, and we headed to the holiday concert at Perkins on the first Sunday in Advent. On the way to the concert, I tried to engage the kids in a conversation about what the concert would be like and remind them of their manners. Most of the kids were noticeably uncomfortable with the experience, and made a few regrettable comments, but by the time we were in the assembly hall, they had pulled themselves together, and were listening to and acting on messages from their "better angels."

The concert lasted a little over an hour and featured small ensembles, the vocal choir, the handbell choir, and the school's combined choirs. The concert was truly amazing. The musicians had excellent pitch and perfect timing, and in the end, they brought the house down and received a standing ovation.

Among other things, the kids and I learned how musicians who faced challenges that were different from our own relied on each other and on alternative methods of making music to create beautiful harmonies—musically, organizationally, and spiritually.

Part of what made this concert so amazing for the kids and me was discovering that the Perkins musicians were not only blind; several were also deaf, and in addition, some were living with Down 's syndrome.

I wasn't surprised to see that blind students could read music, because I was familiar with Braille. But prior to this concert, I couldn't imagine how a conductor could direct

³ <http://www.perkins.org/vision-loss/helen-keller/helenkellerfaq.html>

musicians who couldn't see her. And furthermore, I couldn't imagine how a conductor could teach deaf-blind students to play English handbells without choir members being able to see *or* hear the notes that they and others were playing.

Part of the secret to their success, I realized, lay in the conductor's capacity to teach tempo—not by snapping fingers or playing a metronome in the conventional ways that I had experienced as a musician, but by tapping a dance stick on the floor, so that choristers could feel the tempo through their feet, and count the beats and play their bells in time with the music.

The musical explanation for how the Perkins students learned and performed harmonious music is that the blind students learned pitch by ear, and that the deaf students learned tempo by feel.

The theological explanation for how the Perkins students learned and performed music so harmoniously is that none of them were held back by self-imposed limitations, or the limitations that others might have prescribed for them.

Individually and collectively, they had ears to hear and eyes to see what mattered most. They saw and believed in God's potential for them and for each other. Through their learning and their performing, the Perkins' musicians embodied the real presence of Christ for their audience, many of whom doubted that a different day and a new world were possible.

So, if the deaf can hear God's word of hope in this and other ways, and if the blind can see Christ's brand new day, then surely those of us who have five fully functioning senses can dare to take the leap of faith and believe that God's hope was meant for us, that a new day is dawning before us, and that we can be the real presence of Christ for others this Advent and Christmas season. Amen.