

WATCHING & WAITING
THE UNEXPECTED HOUR

Texts on Sunday, December 1, 2013

Isaiah 1: 10-18; Matthew 24: 36-44

Whoever means to be serious about the possibility that there is a God somewhere needs to be serious about the possibility that the way we worship is no good. Please don't hear me wrong. This word is not a secret message I want to pass around to just some Riversiders about some aspects of worship here. No, this word is for all churches everywhere, and therefore for our church, too. It is a waking word, a buzzing, persistent word come down from the prophets like locusts on the field at harvest. It is a word which, after centuries of silence, shivered again to life in Prophet Jesus, who would not relent from uttering woe on the way they worshiped.

Now Christians have an easy out if they want it. They can always claim that the prophets and Jesus had in mind Temple worship, and that Christian worship is not Temple worship, but true worship, and so we're in the clear. But that is plain denial. Isaiah presses the point to the flesh.

Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your religious games: weekly Sabbaths, meetings, meetings, meetings - I can't stand one more! I hate them! You've worn me out! . . . Do you know why? Because you've been tearing people to pieces, and your hands are bloody. Go home and wash up. Clean up your act. Say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Work for justice. Help the down-and-out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenseless. Come. Sit down. Let's argue this out. (THE MESSAGE translation)

True worship, whatever it is, shows up as justice in the land, says Isaiah, says Jesus. And this sword cuts all ways: Wherever injustice is abroad in the land and nothing is changing, the people must be turning to God in falsehood. And wherever the people are worshipping falsely, their works must issue in injustice. It is a spiritual law. But from right sacrifices follows justice as a fragrant offering. And justice in the land is the rainbow sign that the people are on their way to God. So twined is the relationship of a people to their God and a people to their poor and despised that the whole Bible is inscribed with exactly these curses and these blessings. You won't hear it chanted in the streets, but God's word is: No justice; no worship. Know justice; know worship.

I have been reading the thoughts of Rev. William Sloane Coffin as he prepared to depart from Riverside Church about 25 years ago. At one point, his interviewer asked, "What is this church here for?" Coffin responded.

I do think that this church is a flagship church because of its size, because of its history, and that means it has to set forth and implement the vision of social justice for the city and beyond the city, really for the nation. This church should be able to address issues pertaining to the common life of this nation . . . Now that's easy to say, and it's easy to preach. What is very difficult is, How do you get a handle on it, see? I mean, how are

we going to have fewer homeless and more homes in New York City? Even Gov. Cuomo—we all thought he was going to be very progressive—comes up with 10,000 more jail cells and a tax cut instead of more social welfare and reform . How do you get a hold of it? That's the thing that's hard for a church to do. . . .

It's fine. I can get up in the pulpit and say "55% of black children in New York City now live below the poverty line." And it's true. And 75% of them drop out of high school. And it's true. But what do you do about it? We end up doing just what we're doing now: Charity.

At every church I go to in the country, I always ask, whenever I get to a city, I say, "Show me an advocacy program." And they say, "Well, we have a soup kitchen." And I say, "I'm not asking about a soup kitchen, I'm not asking about a shelter. I'm asking about community organizers, I'm asking about some kind of organization that's advocating systemic change!" Because Marx has us nailed: "You Christians have a vested interest in unjust structures which produce victims to whom then you can pour out your awesome charity." And that's what we're doing right here at Riverside . . . I hope that my successor will play more of a role in the city. I feel I have been a voice, obviously, and people seem to know who I am and they seem to feel I have great concern for the city, but I leave feeling I've done very little more than just talk.

Those are hard words. Every teacher of the tradition who is serious about God is serious about the possibility that we do very little more than just talk. Is it entertaining? Of course. But the words of the prophets are written on the Wall St. walls: As surely as television and shopping and all-sports-all-the-time are weapons of mass distraction more effective than any drug to dull the wits and the woes of the people till none rise up against evil, just so surely has religion in human hands been worked into irons that keep the people seated and satisfied. Worshipers from the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains of meetings, meetings, meetings.

Listen. The trouble with worship is that we have it so in control that we already know all that's going to happen. When it goes a little long and bumps our afternoon plans, it's the worship planners' fault; they should have had that under control. When the bulletin has a blooper, we cluck as if the sun's gone dark and the stars are beginning to fall. Look, I'm not faulting anyone; my thoughts run in the same ruts. But I want you to wonder with me: What would have to happen to a church—this church—for us to let go our control and let God in, so that we don't know exactly what will happen to us now?

You know you've seen it. We have all thrilled to the film footage of church gatherings across the south fifty years ago and more, where worship became the wedge that lifted the heel of evil first from the necks of the oppressed, then kept lifting and lifting till the whole structure of Jim Crow toppled. And you've seen it here—as Riverside rose up for peace with Vietnam; rose up for justice in South Africa; rose up for wholeness and healing with persons living with AIDS, and then raised compassion to a new key for unity and shared ministry with GLBT and marriage equality. You know these stories. These are

the stories of Jesus, the stories you must tell until the Lord comes again.

And that is partly the point: Jesus comes and goes from a church. Even when a church is watching and waiting well, Jesus comes and goes from a church. There are quiet times when not much seems to be happening. There are times when the distinctiveness of Christian life seems to drain from the fellowship, like blood, and it looks pretty much like any association in the wide world—same values, same hankerings, same fears, same fights, same fists in fights. People drift in and out, for being Christian has neither risky nor taste. The salt loses its saltiness. Everybody knows what's going to happen in worship, and when, and why. But then, at an unexpected hour, things change.

It has been my great privilege to wade with some churches deep into the waters, and to get in well over our heads, and to lose our lives for Christ's sake and for the gospel, and to receive new birth. I have told you before of that small church I served in the upper Hudson Valley where men living and dying with AIDS finally broke the hearts of enough people in that congregation that they were changed. In the twinkling of an eye, at last, they became a spiritual community and worshiped in spirit and in truth. What was the sign of it? Justice! What was the sense of it? Love. Sacrifice. Caring no longer how they were seen in society so long as they were seen caring for the sick and for strangers.

Look, in the Lord's judgment, it is said that "two men will be in the field; one taken and one left and two women will be grinding at the mill; one taken and one left. Therefore be ready." This is a figure, not a forecast. The scene of final judgment is a figure for decision, which way you will go. Why, according to the tradition, when Jesus had gone up from that first assembly of God's church, angels challenged the apostles, "Why do you stand looking into heaven? Jesus . . . will come in the same way as you saw him go." How did they see him go? By the way of the Cross, at an unexpected hour. The unexpected hour is the hour of decision, when, after long watching and waiting, you get it that you will never have it all together, never have a perfect church or perfect pastor, never have all your sorrows sealed nor griefs gone down like the sun, never be all ready, never all righteous—and then, then, at an hour you did not expect, the Lord will return, overturning the tables and the tea service and the worship service so that all God's children may come in.



To serve as an interim minister is an odd calling. As with all interims, here at Riverside it meant not starting anything I could not finish, not leading toward a far country, regardless what dreams may come to my heart. It meant not trying to change the culture, but rather helping you to see your culture, so you might lay hold of it, for no one can change what they do not see.

Soon you will call a new senior minister to your side. Then, at the hour you least expect, the Lord will return. Oh, not tomorrow. Not the day the new minister comes. Not Christmas Day or Easter Day, either. Not when you expect it, but when you don't. The unexpected hour will come . . . now.

Some Sunday morning when you least expect it, you—or enough of you, at any rate—will all together feel it, that the time has come for everything to change. The worship hour, to change. The justice hour, for change. And you will not ask of your leader that she or he just sit in the corner and watch and learn how you have done it. For you will know that the hour has come. You will be ready. Now wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. You must be ready. For the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

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The Riverside Church
in the City of New York