

Proper 14, Year C

St. Barnabas

Heb. 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

This morning's readings from Scripture speak of watchfulness and faith: "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit... You must be ready," says Jesus to his disciples. In the midst of life, writes the author of Hebrews, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." "Our God will come and will not keep silence," sings the psalmist.

As the sermon we call the letter to the Hebrews intones, "Who could be more watchful and faithful than Abraham?" Throughout Abraham's journeys---from Haran to Canaan to Egypt to the Negev and back again to the vicinity of Salem, what we now call Jerusalem---he has heard the voice of God promising an inheritance of what kind he does not know and where he does not know he is going. We can tell that Abraham's watchfulness and waiting is being tested by delay in the fulfillment of the promises. After all, Abraham is old and Sarah is barren. How is it that she shall have one foot in the grave and the other in the maternity ward?¹ But Abraham considers him faithful who has promised; and God has promised descendants, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." So Abraham believes the Lord and continues to watch and wait with faith, as did the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews, as did Jesus' disciples, as do we.

In the tradition of many cultures there appears the theme of a watchman waiting for things not seen. Six centuries before the common era, the watchman on the Ishtar Gates of Babylon witnessed the conqueror of the known world, Cyrus, King of Persia, enter the city. You and I can see these massive sapphire blue gates adorned with mythic creatures today, in the Pergamum Museum in east Berlin. Cyrus is the only non-Israelite in the Old Testament to whom the title "messiah" is given. Unaware of his charge from God, Cyrus is depicted in Scripture as the agent of the Lord, an enlightened ruler who gives back the spoils of war and permits the conquered exiles to return to Jerusalem and restore their decimated temple. But while the Persians gained much by their contacts with other civilizations, there is no evidence that Cyrus ever acknowledged the sovereignty of God. There is no evidence that he recognized God in the midst of life. And the Persian Wars with Greece ended in disaster for the house of Cyrus.

A century after Cyrus as the returned exiles were rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, the victorious Greeks performed their own religious ritual at home, Greek theater. For that theater, Aeschylus wrote the trilogy *Oresteia*. The first book of *Orestia*, the *Agamemnon*, opens with another watchman, in this case a witness to war and conquest, the fall of Troy. You and I can read the *Agamemnon* today and experience not the physical but the poetic/psychological reality of

¹ Adapted from Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (NY: Harper Row, 1973) 25.

ancient Greece. We can experience once again a witness NOT to God but to the tragic flaws of human hubris and necessity.

A contemporary of Aeschylus, the author of the psalms, like a watchman stands ready within the temple precinct of Jerusalem praying, “Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, God reveals himself in glory. Our God will come and will not keep silence...to those who keep in my way will I show the salvation of God.” The psalmist is not looking for conquerors or for signs of war. He looks for a different kind of deliverance. This poet looks for both his own and Israel’s consolation. He looks for the fulfillment of hope, the promises of God. This artist waits to witness a vision of wholeness because he has been prepared to see that image. He has been schooled to see. How was the psalmist prepared, one might ask.

The psalmist’s promises have been the words of his faith tradition, songs and prayers such as those found in Isaiah, “Come let us reason together...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” And “my eyes *have seen your salvation* [Is. 40:5], which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, *a light for revelation to the Gentiles* [Is. 49:6] and for glory to your people Israel.” The psalmist’s entire reality is shaped by the images of faith. So he comes to the city where poetry and history meet. He comes to the city where earth and heaven meet, a city you and I can see, a city you and I can know. He comes to Jerusalem.

In the eighteenth century, the poet William Blake gave the name “Jerusalem” to all that is tender in the human soul. He wrote, “I give you the end of a golden string. Only wind it into a ball. It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate, Built in Jerusalem’s wall.” Blake’s poetry suggests that the route to faithfulness is something like a labyrinth we follow through life. The end of the golden string is the gracious gift of God given to each of us which can too easily become “hidden under the circumstances of our daily life [or even] lost if we choose not to attend to it.”²

Judging from the frequency with which we hear about the search for deeper spiritual understanding, it would appear that increasing numbers of people are seeking to attend to the holy image in their lives and their role in relationship to it. But are they attentive to the giftedness of life? No, most don’t negotiate that turn. The therapeutic model is much more accessible, and that model is rampant in our culture. Just go to your local bookstore and browse the aisles on self-improvement. True, some of these authors invoke a higher power, but that appeal is only for the purpose of self-help; and self-help is hardly the answer to hubris or human tragedy. Those whose answer is self-help follow not so much a labyrinth as a beltway that circles round and round but never enters in.

² Bruno Barnhart, “The Golden String Newsletter,” copyright @2001-2002 Bede Griffiths Association.

I am reminded of a Peanuts example of living as if avoiding the turn to faith: Lucy is parked in her psychiatric booth, and Charlie Brown is sharing his problems with her. “Sometimes I ask myself questions,” he begins. “Sometimes I ask myself, ‘Is this your real life, or is this just a pilot film? Is my life a thirty-nine-week series or is it something special?’” In no time at all Lucy analyzes his problem and gives an instant answer: “Whatever it is, your ratings are down. Five cents, please!”

There are no rehearsals before the opening performance of our lives. There are no pilot episodes or reruns, though some of us practice the labyrinth of faith---watching and waiting---as if we were opening in Philadelphia before subjecting our show to the bright lights of Broadway! We live as if rehearsing for life because we’re unwilling to go deep enough.

If we really believed God were, as God is, our ultimate audience, would our ratings be down? Churches don’t have to become museums, or mausoleums. We have the images this world desperately needs to shape its life. Wall Street doesn’t have them. Madison Avenue doesn’t have them. Much of television doesn’t have them. WE have them. We have the good news of God with us, God for us every day to share with the world. Then why aren’t we better at recognizing God in the midst of life?

Perhaps we fail to see because we aren’t persistent enough about seeking spiritual nourishment. We aren’t persistent enough about winding that golden string. You may remember the priest who announced during Sunday morning worship that in the interest of time---which was running short---the congregation would only sing one verse of “Take Time to be Holy.” Yes, it takes time to be holy. It takes time to set aside regular routines for worship. It takes time to prepare ourselves to find God in the midst of life by reading words of Scripture, meditating upon the psalms, watching for the promises. It takes a lifetime.

Anxiously we ask, how long must I watch and how long must I wait to find God in the midst of life? In the 1930’s the German Lutheran Church found itself forced to make a decision between waiting and acting, between ethical laxity and costly grace. Early in the Nazification of Germany, theologian and scholar Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against slipping into the idolatrous cult of their leader, the Fuhrer. Nevertheless, the Hitler-supported German Lutheran Church unconstitutionally imposed new church elections for officials of the church and went so far as to demand the removal of the Old Testament from the Bible and all pastors and church officials of Jewish descent from their posts. In response Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller founded the Confessing Church. Believing that his true homeland was a heavenly one, Bonhoeffer was martyred at the age of 39 for his efforts. After the war Niemoller wrote a poetic confession which has become well known:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out---because I was not a socialist.
 Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out---because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out---because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me---and there was no one left to speak for me.

Today there sits a museum on the outskirts of the new city of Jerusalem. This museum is different from others: It serves as a reminder to men and women of all nations of the need to be watchful in our waiting. The name of the museum is Yad Vashom. Yad Vashom is a memorial to the victims of the holocaust of World War II, largely Jews but also Roman Catholics, Gypsies, anyone deemed expendable by the Nazi regime.

Yad Vashom consists of a number of buildings and monuments. One is constructed in the shape of a tent, open at the top so that the small campfire inside may be kept continuously burning. This building is a reminder of the nomadic existence of the prophets of the Old Testament, Abram and his descendants in particular. But the sites of occupation plotted as a map around the campfire are not Haran, Canaan, Egypt, the Negev, but instead such names as Dachau, Bergen Belsen, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the other locations of concentration camps.

The smallest building is perhaps the most affecting. Hollowed out from an underground cavern, this structure was donated by an American couple in memory of their child who died in one of those concentration camps. Approaching the cavern, one is confronted by unfinished stone pillars, concrete shafts with rebar exposed to the sky, signifying lives begun but cut short before completion. Upon entering the small interior, the visitor is immediately engulfed in darkness penetrated only by small candles placed in front of mirrors. Gradually while listening to the roll call of the names of 1.5 million children who perished in the holocaust, ones eyes begin to see more clearly that the candles are magnified in number by the mirrors, resulting in the appearance of the infinity of space filled with millions of stars like the promised descendants of Abraham. There are promises yet left there, words not yet spoken, realities yet unrealized.

“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them....So shall your descendants be,” promised God; and Abraham believed the Lord.

You and I are not watchmen in a world where war and chaotic chance reign. Rather, we live in a homeland shielded by the grace of God. We can watch for reflected promises and in so doing can see a different reality. The mindless assassins of humanity do not rule. At the intersection of biblical history, memory and hope, we together with Abraham watch and wait. We with Abraham stand negotiating between life and faith. Like Abraham, deep in our souls we

can believe that God is trustworthy. We can grasp the golden thread that leads to Heaven's gate, attend to the giftedness of life, and in so doing be led to the fulfillment of faith.

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