

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, December 2, 2007

Sermon Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, it's December 2, and everyone is already celebrating Christmas it seems except the church. In our lectionary reading today, we have two moods for Advent. One is the coming of Christ, and one is the second coming of Christ or Christ's return. Today, we hit Christ's return. Not very Christmassy, is it?

From the earliest church and consistently through the Gospels and the Epistles and the Revelation of John is a constant theme that Christ will come again. When will He come again is the question. No way of knowing is the answer. What to do in the meantime – be found living out Jesus' message of love, forgiveness, compassion, and grace. The truth is we do get bored with that probably because we haven't done it very much.

It is never boring to enter honestly into the needs of another human being. It is scary, but it is not boring. It is costly in time and talent and treasure, but it is not boring.

Now, I read what I think is a funny little story I ran across. The first time I read it, I heard the woman in the illustration as Gladys Turner's voice. I asked Gladys if I could use it. I think it's funny if you hear it that way. It has nothing to do with her personality, just her voice somehow.

It was a rainy Sunday afternoon, and Martha Finch was bored silly. She didn't know what to do with herself. The telephone rang, and a voice said, “This is State Trooper Sergeant George Kowalski speaking. I'd like to speak with Ms. Martha Finch.” “Oh,” she said, “This is Martha Finch speaking.” Then the man said, “I'm sorry to tell you this, but I have an arrest warrant charging you with a failure to answer a traffic summons. I'm going to have to come get you.” She said, “Wonderful! How soon can you come and get me?” She was bored out of her mind, you see. It's funnier than that.

With all that we have, and all that we have to do, we still get bored. Now, my sister, whom some of you met at my 50th birthday party, confessed a few years ago at a family gathering what I suspect is a truth larger than just hers. She said that sometimes when things are going extremely well in her life, when everything is peaceful, and finances are fine, and emotions are fine, and relationships are fine, her daughter is fine, and all is right with the world, sometimes she said, “I get bored, and I start a fight for no reason at all.” Raise your hand if you do that. In the early service, my wife did. She raised her hand.

Robert Frost wrote, “Something there is that does not love a law, and wants it down.” I think, and it's not a good thing, but there is something in us that does not really like peace, and we stir things up. I don't know why, but I'm sure, I am sure that we get bored, and start unnecessary trouble as a species, as a human race. We are restless, and we are never satisfied, and we want targets. We want somebody to blame, somebody to answer for our restlessness, for our troubles, for our boredom. When we lack a crisis, we make one up.

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That’s why I believe we rush into Christmas a little early. To me, as I see it, Christmas comes very close to awakening those feelings of true faith because the Christmas dream is that we can become again like little children. Faith also encourages us to become like little children, trusting with hope against hope that somehow, someone who loves us will come and make it all come out okay. The Christmas dream and the Christian faith do intersect at that point. Childlike trust and childlike recognition that we need someone bigger and better than we are to make things right. As children, we knew something of peace and trust and hope. If we can remember, as children we knew that before the world beat it out of us as an adult.

I am convinced that there is something wrong with all of humanity, and you do not need a theology of the fall, and you don’t need to believe in sin and selfishness. You need only a history book and a daily paper. There also seems to be some tediousness to having all you ever wanted. Have you noticed how the rich and famous seem to sabotage their wealth and their fame and their health? It seems that boredom sets in and takes over and drives people from excess to excess, and we see them on TV being taken off to jail, being taken off to rehab, being taken off to hospital. I think they know what we only suspect.

You ask, as they’re being carried off, lightly if they’d be happy with their mansions and with their children and with all their stuff. The answer is I believe that they know for certain what we only suspect. They know that all the money and all the fame in the world cannot give you peace and will not make you happy.

So often, the modern dream of success is to have a gated house high on a hill and to be locked away from others. Isn’t that the precise opposite of what Jesus said? Our job description is to be out there in the world among the people sharing His love, offering the Gospel, and living compassion even with our enemies. We are to be those who seek to be neighbor to the ones in need, to their physical and to their spiritual and to their emotional needs. If we follow Christ, we cannot call a house on a hill cut off from others a success.

Frederick Boatner wrote the following. It’s about the Second Coming, but it ties this all together I hope. He said, “Who knows how He will come or when or where. He says himself, “Of that day and hour no one knows not even the angels of Heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.” People who search a timetable and try to crack the book of Revelation like a code are on a wild goose chase, he writes. People who claim that all who join their sect will be saved and all others are lost are wrong. The ones who will be saved, Jesus says in the very next chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, are the ones who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. If you love, in other words, you’re in. If you don’t, you’re out. Reread Matthew 25 as you get home today, and see for yourself.

There are some strange individualistic theologies around, which claim to be Christian, but if it is entirely for you, and you alone, and it does not require any response or any reaching down in the ditch to lift up your broken brother or the broken stranger then I submit to you it is not what Jesus taught. We have and we know we have a God-shaped

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hole in our hearts, which nothing else will fill. We know in our hearts that something better than this was meant for our world and for our lives. We yearn for a world at peace, for relationships at peace, for our heart connected to something greater than ourselves and to others we can love and who will love us in return. Not just on rare moments, but for always. We yearn for something the world has never known. We're almost nostalgic for something we have never had. Jesus taught us to pray for that day by saying, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.” We pray for that day because it is not done yet, and it is not fully come yet. Not yet. So even in the valley of the shadow of death, God is there. We believe.

Faith that is placed in any building or any friend or government or self-help group or ideal or political party will ultimately disappoint us because the only one who stands outside of our world, who purposefully moves it toward a good end is God. When in God we trust, our souls and our bodies are connected to the God, who stretches throughout history past into history future, a strong cable that is unrustable, unbreakable, unbendable, and utterly reliable. We believe that in the beginning there was God, and in the end there will be God.

Everything will be shaken in our world. The earth, the heavens, the politics, and even our very lives, but in the end there will be God. You know, nobody gets out of here alive. None of us. We believe in something better than survival though. We believe in the power of God in Christ to make all things new, even us. That's where our trust is. That's whom our trust is in. When will we need that trust most? Every day, every day!

So be ready, be found faithful, trusting in God, loving as Jesus loved, even when it costs you, and maybe especially when it costs you. I read this passage as a passage of hope. It says when you think you've hit the bottom, when you think that you've come to the end of the road, when you've reached a dead end, when you're at the end of your rope, you should not be surprised that God is there, giving you hope, giving you hope!

There's an expression I came across called prisoner of hope, and it came from an African-American scholar, Cornell West, a teacher and an author. He was lecturing on American culture, and he came about the expression this way. He was talking about the whole landscape from democracy to rap music, from drug addiction in the inner city to wealth addiction in the suburbs, from the false promises of materialism to the plight of homelessness, and during the question and answer period, Dr. West was asked about the dismal state of our inner cities, the depressing poverty, and the plight of our young, and he responded, “I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful.” I'm not optimistic, but I am hopeful. “We cannot fix these problems tomorrow or next week, but we can make a difference. The future is open. It's not determined. As a Christian, I am a prisoner of hope because in Jesus God has taken hold of us, and will not let us go, nor will God let us quit. Jesus faced the cross trusting in God's resurrection power, and so I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful.” He said he was a prisoner of hope. Jesus was prisoner of hope, and He calls us to become prisoners of hope no matter what, even a cross, even a tomb, even the end and beyond. We trust and hope in God. In the meantime, we have work to do. Thy Kingdom come, Jesus taught us to pray, Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Now, I invite you to keep the peace until His coming again. Amen.