

"WHAT TO DO TILL THE MESSIAH COMES"
December 1, 1991

TEXT: Matthew 24:44 "Therefore, you must also be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Last Tuesday, I was thumbing through the morning paper, when I came across something that spoke to me about this morning's sermon. I had looked at the front page, the editorials, and the sports page --not necessarily in that order-- when I began to glance through the "comics." One of them, called Cathy, caught my eye. It showed a young woman sitting at a desk piled high with papers. Perhaps that is why I noticed. It may have reminded me of my own desk.

Anyway, Cathy was talking to herself. "It's too late to start any big projects for the year," she said, "but too early to start panicking for the holidays. It's too late to get organized for 1991," she went on, "but too early to launch into the all-new 1992 system. It's too late to lose any real weight this year but too early to start the New Year's diet." Then, in the last panel, she adds, with a glazed look on her face, "November 26th: Kick-off date of the pre-holiday coma."

Well, it may be even worse now. Last Tuesday most of us were looking forward to Thanksgiving, but now even that is behind us. And while we are constantly reminded that there are only so many shopping days till Christmas, most of us are not ready to deal with that. So, psychologically, as well as chronologically, we are between holidays. For the moment, at least, we are waiting.

But, if you think about it, God's people have always been waiting. The Jews in Egypt, waiting for a Moses. Their children in Babylon, waiting to go home. Post-exilic Jews waiting for the Messiah. And both Christians and Jews waiting through the ages for God to finish His work of salvation.

For some, the long delay has become unbearable. They have grown so tired of waiting that they just can not wait any longer. They say that God is dead --or that He never existed at all. They take refuge in materialism, in furious activity, in that total abandonment to pleasure we call hedonism. In fact, they will do almost anything but wait. So, even as life becomes busier and busier, it grows more and more empty. Empty because, in a very real sense, it is the waiting that gives life meaning.

That, of course, flies in the face of contemporary thinking. We are the "Now Generation." Delayed gratification is almost

completely foreign to us and growing more so. We do not want to wait. What we want, we want now whatever the consequence. We are unceasingly reminded that life must be lived in the present. And, of course, that is true. But it is lived in a present which is molded by our expectations of the future. So I repeat, "In a very real sense, it is waiting which gives life meaning."

We see that graphically portrayed in Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot. All through the play two men, Vladimir and Estragon, sit on stage, "waiting for Godot." At first, they are enthusiastic and animated. They are sure Godot will come any minute now. After all, he has said he would. And they believe him. But, as the play goes on, they grow less and less certain. And they also become less animated, less purposeful.

Finally, they no longer speak of waiting. They just sit there, prattling aimlessly. They do not even have enough sense of purpose to get up and leave. They talk about it. "Perhaps we should go," one of them says. "Yes," the other replies, "perhaps we should." But they do not. And, in the end, the curtain comes down with both of them sitting there just muttering nonsense.

Now, I am not sure exactly what Beckett meant to convey, but I know what it says to me. It reminds me that life, and the Christian life especially, takes meaning and power from Christ's pledge, "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (John 14:3)

We know that salvation history began long ago when God first revealed Himself to mankind and called us into fellowship with Him. We know that it was advanced, bit by bit, by psalmists and prophets, and that it made a quantum leap forward in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

But we also know that our salvation story is not complete and that only God can complete it. The Kingdom of God comes only by God's power and God's grace. So we pray, as Christians have always prayed, "Thy Kingdom come!" And we wait. But, for Christians, the waiting is different. We know the One for Whom we wait. And we know that He will come. The question is not "if", or even "when." It is "What To Do Till the Messiah Comes."

And we find the answer in today's Scripture. In what is sometimes called "the little apocalypse", Jesus, Himself, tells us. And to make His answer easier to remember, I would like to break it down into three "W's."

The first stands for "Wait." Wait faithfully, expectantly. Much of the senselessness of modern day living comes about because we have ceased to wait. We act like men and women who accept the lie that this life is all there is. Christian and non-Christian alike, we live, like Vladimir and Estragon, in diminished expectancy.

And, like them, our lives become increasingly empty. The only antidote I know is to renew our expectation. Not necessarily that Christ will come today, or tomorrow, or even in our lifetime. But that somehow, in the fullness of time, God will finish what He began so long ago. That His Kingdom will come. His Will shall be done on earth, even as it is in heaven. For our lives have meaning only in relation to that promise.

And the second "W" stands for "Watch." In Mark 13:35, Jesus says, "Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come" And we might add, "Or how." God has always worked His will at the most unpredictable times and by the most unexpected means: a son born to Sarah and Abraham when they were more than ninety years old; Moses, a Prince of Egypt, who led the Jews out of Egypt; David, the teen-aged son of an unimportant peasant; Cyrus, King of Persia, who conquered Babylon and let God's people go; Jesus of Nazareth, also born to a peasant and in the lowliest corner of the Roman Empire; Saul, who was once the fiercest enemy of the church. And who can say how God will seek to advance his Kingdom during our lifetimes. If we are not watchful, we may miss it.

And the third "W" stands for "Work." In this morning's lesson, Jesus said, "Two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left." (Matthew 24:40-41) It is part of the Christian paradox that, although salvation is God's free gift, it still somehow involves our work. Nothing we do can either earn our own salvation or bring about the Day of the Lord. Yet we are commanded to work as if neither could happen by any other means.

We may not understand that, but God's Word is clear. In the parable of the talents, the foolish servant was condemned, not because he failed to turn a profit, but because he did not even try. And St Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonians in large measure to remind them that they must work now "for the night is coming when no one can work."

This, then, is the message of Advent. "Wait. Watch. Work." For we know neither when --nor how-- our Master will come. We may not take the outrageous imagery in the book of Revelation literally. But William Barclay reminds us to see in it a warning "never to become so immersed in time that we forget eternity, never to let our concern for worldly affairs, however necessary, completely distract us from remembering that there is a God, that the issues of life and death are in His hands and that whenever His call comes . . . it must find us ready."

That is why we celebrate Advent. To remind us to wait, but to wait expectantly, alertly, usefully. Only then can we honestly sing the closing words of our final hymn: "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide in us, Our Lord Emmanuel."