

May 14, 2017

“Are You Ready?”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 24:36-44

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How many of you have ever walked through an ancient cemetery? It's fascinating isn't it? You walk through and see all the different headstones, many of them crumbling or covered with moss due to their age and the weather. Some are tipped forward or backwards or sideways due to the settling of the ground below. And sometimes clearly, and sometimes with difficulty, you can still make out the names of persons who, like we do now, once lived here upon the earth.

More often than not in ancient cemeteries, there's a Biblical verse or inscription on the stone. Back then, people took their religion more seriously. In one of my walks recently, I came across a headstone and it had a verse that shook me to the core and reminded me of my own mortality. It's the one we heard today. "Be ye also ready, for in an hour you know not, the Son of Man will come." Be ye ready! Now is that just a recommendation, or is it a warning? And as I was contemplating those words and why they were on that person's headstone, I noticed the dates inscribed on the stone. Born 1663, dash, died 1745. A long life defined by just two dates with a dash in the middle. Imagine the scope of life – being born in the 1600s, here on Cape Cod, living eighty-two years in relatively primitive conditions, and all that must have entailed. And yet, the entirety of that person's life – the good, the bad, the pain, the joy, the hardships, all that he did and all that he was, represented by a small, short, simple, “dash.” A "dash!" That doesn't seem fair, or right, does it? One's life should be much more than a dash, don't you think? But lest you feel somewhat disheartened by this thought, consider the Apostle's Creed we recited last week. The whole of Jesus' life here on earth is defined by just a comma. "Born of the Virgin Mary, comma, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried." Even Jesus just gets a comma. So what's the point? Well, whether it's a dash or comma, it doesn't really matter. However, what it stands for does really matter. Because ultimately all that we are and all that we do, will lead to one final end. Hopefully, one final, glorious end – eternal life with God in heaven.

You know, last week many of us went to see *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat* at the Highfield Theater. That was a wonderful show! And the opening song actually got me thinking about today's meditation and how we fill our dash. Let me read some of the lyrics for you.

*Some folks dream of the wonders they'll do
Before their time on this planet is through
Some just don't have anything planned
They hide their hopes and their heads in the sand*

Now to most of us, the thought of doing wonders like Joseph did by saving both Egypt and Israel from starvation, might seem a little out of our reach. But, on the other hand, the thought of just going through our days, doing virtually nothing, is both wrong and maybe even scary. Especially in light of today's Scripture reading. Where we hear Jesus tell us, we'll be eating, drinking, marrying, working, doing those ordinary things in life, when suddenly, in an hour we know not, the Lord will be coming for us. Therefore, he says, be ready. Be ready! So how can we get to that point, where our life, our dash, becomes meaningful, and we're not only ready, but we welcome the Lord.

Well, first let's consider what's probably the most basic of all biblical tenets. In fact, we pray this every week. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." This is the prayer Jesus himself taught us. You see, that's what it's all about - that God's will be done. And I believe with all my heart that the will of God for you and for me is for good. And God's will for our world is for good as well. Always! God created this beautiful world and made us in his image, and he said it was all good, very good, in fact. But somehow, our world has become out of joint. And the will of God is being obstructed by an unwilling people. I like how Eugene Peterson, the author of the Message version of the Bible, describes it. "There is a spiritual war in progress, an all out moral battle. There is evil and cruelty, unhappiness and illness. There is superstition and ignorance, brutality and pain. God is in the continuous and energetic battle against all of it. God is for life and against death. God is for love and against hate. God is for hope and against despair. God is for heaven and against hell. There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square foot of space is being contested." Yes, we all know that evil and injustice exists. We don't need any more proof. But if God's will for our world is good, which I think we all believe, then the question for each and every one of us is this: how can I participate (to make this world a better place)? And like Eugene Peterson infers, that's the battlefield where we play a strategic role so as to make our dash most meaningful.¹

¹ *The Will of God* Excerpts, J. E. Kalas

So let's look again at today's Scripture. How do we keep the evil thief from breaking into the house? Jesus tells us - by taking the right measures to thwart him, that's how. Like being ready, staying awake, being proactive. The same measures we must take in this world to thwart evil, injustice, pain, despair. Yes, it actually takes effort on our part to fight for what is right. Martin Luther King was correct when he said, "He who passively accepts (injustice) is as much responsible for it as he who actually perpetrates it." Or another famous quote, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is that good men do nothing." In this life, if there is something in the world that opposes the will of God, then there needs to be people in the world that do what's right, so that his will can be fulfilled. That's where we, as Christians come in. We listen to where Jesus is calling us to make a difference. Where Jesus is calling us to go and do as the prophet Micah said, "To love kindness, to do justice, and to walk humbly before God." And to be quite honest, sometimes what we are called to do may not be easy, or convenient or comfortable.

Bishop Willimon tells this story. "One of my churches feeds over a hundred homeless people every morning in Birmingham, Alabama. The other day, I went to visit with them and I stuck my head in the church's kitchen to thank everybody. In the kitchen, I recognized a man I had met a few weeks before. I was really surprised to see him there, because he was a very affluent businessman and a member of one of our biggest and most prosperous suburban congregations. But there he was, washing dishes for homeless people. I spoke to him and said, 'It's so nice to see you here. Have you always enjoyed working with homeless people?' He responded rather callously at first, 'Who told you I enjoyed working with homeless people? Have you met any of these people? They're a difficult bunch. Many are drunks, many are addicts, many are lazy, and some are just plain crazy. That's why they're homeless!' Taken aback by his sharp reply, I very gently asked him, 'Then, how did you get here, washing dishes at seven o'clock in the morning for homeless people?' He looked up from the dishes and said humbly, 'I got put here by Jesus, that how.' Then he looked at me and said, 'And just how did you get where you are?'"

There are lots of stories like that about people filling their dash by being proactive. Here's another about a woman who stated that she hates the Methodist Church. She said, "Before I became a Methodist, my life was my life. I was content with myself. Then the church took me on a mission trip to Haiti and they made me help people who were literally dying because of their poverty, yet who were so much more richer in their faith than I could ever be. I could have had a fairly happy and content life without

the church. But now these strangers in Haiti have become my life. I'm helping them and thinking about them as if they were my family. And I've got the church and Jesus to blame for that."

Yes, Jesus calls us into action, every day. He calls us to love, to offer compassion, to serve, to surrender. And so, be ready. Make your dash count. As I once heard it said, "When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live in such a way that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice with God in heaven."