

God Only Knows
Sermon, November 29, 2016
The First Sunday of Advent
Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

"Do you know how to keep a secret?" the man asked his friend. *"Yes!"* the friend responded with anxious excitement, eager to hear what delicious private confidence was about to be shared with him. *"Well, so do I!"* said the first man ... and smiling, he walked away. His friend, of course, was crestfallen. But the first man certainly made a point. He knew what is probably the primary secret to keeping a secret ... that the only way to keep a secret is to keep it!

Some select quotes on keeping secrets, the first comes from Benjamin Franklin: *"Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead."* From the German poet, Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *"Whoever wishes to keep a secret must hide the fact that he possesses one."* A Portuguese proverb: *"Tell your friend a lie. If he keeps it secret, then tell him the truth."* Samuel Johnson: *"To keep your secret is wisdom; but to expect others to keep it is folly."* Jeremy Taylor: *"Secrecy is the chastity of friendship."* Secrecy is the chastity of friendship ... one has to think about that for a moment ... the friend who betrays a secret is not only being unfaithful, but unchaste. Groucho Marks: *"The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made."* And from that pillar of philosophical wisdom, Miley Cyrus: *"If you want your secret kept, don't tell me."* An old Latin proverb: *"The dog who fetches will also carry."* That's another one you have to think about for a moment: Basically, if someone carries another's secrets to you, that same person will readily carry your secrets to just about anyone else. A Chinese proverb: *"Do not do all you can, do not spend all you have, do not believe all you hear, and do not tell all you know."*

Secrets are not a bad thing in and of themselves. We have secret operations in the military which do much to avoid exponentially greater conflict. We keep certain secrets about harsh realities from some people until they are mature and/or equipped enough to handle them. We keep our secret thoughts and opinions to ourselves when revealing those secrets would be neither wise nor helpful. There really needs to be no tension between being truthful and being discreet. Secrecy can indeed be a virtue, if for no other reason than privacy is a right to be guarded. It is not necessary to know everything about everybody; nor is it necessary to reveal everything about ourselves. There are times when silence is golden; we don't have to always vocalize the truth! There are times when our truthful opinion is neither desired nor necessary; a good rule of thumb, however, is that if our silence can be taken for approval of something of which in fact we morally disapprove, then I think we must speak up ... as mentioned last week, it's OK to let people know what you stand for, and what you *won't* stand for. Also, if our silence can lead to someone's harm, again, I think we have a duty to speak up. However, the ability, tenacity and integrity involved in keeping a secret really is an honorable quality, in fact, it can be a divine attribute. Even God keeps secrets! Apparently, He kept at least one secret even from Jesus!

"No one knows that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father." That Day Jesus speaks of is that glorious final day when the kingdom of God will come in all its fullness, when the Son of Man comes as Judge to usher in a new heaven and a new earth. Well, the exact *date* of that Day is not known. There are some things God only knows ... and again, He kept at least one secret even from Jesus! For those of us in the baby boom generation, "God Only Knows" calls to mind the old Beach Boy's hit: *"I may not always love you, but long as there are stars above you, you never need to doubt it, I'll make you so sure about it, GOD ONLY KNOWS what I'd be without you."* At the risk of being slightly corny, imagine the Gospel writer singing, *"This God will always love you, long as there are stars above you. You never need to doubt it; Jesus will make you so sure about it!"* In our reading Jesus speaks of that Day when *"the stars will NO LONGER be above you"...* the stars will fall from the sky, the heavenly bodies will be shaken, and on that Day the Son of Man will come ushering in a new heaven and a new earth, and the kingdom of God will come in all its fullness. But the exact date of that Day? God only knows!

Technically speaking, that Day isn't really "The End;" it really is the new Beginning. But by whatever name it is named ... the Second Coming, the Eschaton, the Parousia, the Final Advent ... it is the time the people of God have longed for at least since the prophet Isaiah spoke the words in this morning's Old Testament reading. That Day will be that time when all the nations will come to the mountain of the Lord, and all worship God as one people. It is that time when God's justice and

mercy will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, when there will be no more need for swords and spears, only plowshares and pruning hooks ... for nation shall not lift sword against nation, and there won't be any need train for war any more. It is understandable that Jesus' disciples, under the military occupation of Rome, wanted to know when that Day would be and Jesus tells them, *"Well, it's a secret. God only knows. But until that Day, you stay awake and alert! Keep watch. Be ready!"*

The watchfulness Jesus tells His disciples to keep is not a matter of simply waiting around watching the hours of some cosmic clock tick down to the Omega point. He doesn't want His disciples to be like some hourly employees sitting on their hands idly passing the time watching the clock at work instead of actually working. Nor does He want any of us to be those grumbly, lazy employees who are always keeping an eye out for the Boss so they can "look busy" when he comes by. In the course of my lifetime I've had many jobs. Some were mundane, tedious jobs which seemed to defy laws of physics by making clocks go slower and even making time stand still ... quitting hour never seemed to come soon enough. But I've also had jobs where I was so busily engrossed and engaged in what I was doing that time would just fly by! The kind of alertness Jesus implores His disciples to have is the kind of industrious alertness that is just so busily and wholeheartedly and even joyfully engaged in the work we are called and gifted to do that we almost lose track of the time. It's the kind of watchfulness and readiness that is working as *if* the Boss would walk in at any moment, but certainly not out of any sense of wariness or fear ... no, if anything, you are working as if you *hope* the Boss will come by at any moment, because you love being a team player, you are grateful this Boss has entrusted you with a job and a calling and a responsibility and has you in his or her employ. You are proud of your work, proud of your calling, and the thought of the Boss coming by fills you with eager anticipation because you want to please him, you *want* him to see what you are (*or have been*) doing!

*(The following was edited out of the spoken sermon due to time constraints ... slc) And in a way from time to time Jesus the Boss **does** come on the scene and make His presence known wherever His people are faithful to His words and are eagerly engaged in His work. The invisible but almost tangible presence of Jesus has a way of just "breaking" in at unexpected times and blessing your socks off when you are engaged in living life as He would have you live it! Many of you know that from personal experience; you've felt this overwhelming Presence of blessing and inspiration from time to time as you are engaged in doing the things Jesus calls you to do.)*

As most of you know, last Sunday was the final Sunday in the liturgical calendar, Christ the King Sunday. Today, we begin the new liturgical year with the first Sunday of Advent. The story and the hope we rehearse liturgically year in and year out can be boiled down to four main parts: *Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.* During the season of Advent we remember the expectation and waiting and watching and longing for the first arrival of Christ into our world, and we also remember and call to mind the promised *return* arrival of Christ. Whether you believe or not, Jesus will come back: physically, visibly and really ... and when He returns, history as we know it will end and a whole new eternal chapter will begin. We don't know when; it's a secret, God only knows. As our Gospel reading intimates, for those not prepared for Jesus' return, it will be a harsh and surprising and even frightening reality that will hit like a cold slap in the face. However, for those who are prepared, for those who are faithful and busily engaged and watchful and alert, then Advent is a slap on the back of encouragement, encouraging us to keep at it in the time we have. Yes, the Boss will return, and He may even pop in to check out your work from time to time, so in the meantime, keep it up! Jesus says, *"Yes, there's a new world coming! In the meantime, stay awake, keep at it, stay ready!"* Keep on doing what is right and good in life. Keep on making good memories. Keep on using this fleeting time that you have **WELL!**

Paul echoes the same theme in our reading from Romans: *"Wake up! Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here."* Paul tells us to *put on* our salvation in the time we have and live into it and just put *aside* the useless, futile, destructive ... and frankly, idiotic ... works of darkness. Don't waste time even thinking about how to gratify those stupid, destructive desires of the sinful nature anymore; there's a new world coming, and it's closer than you think! Yes, there will be a day when, straight out of the blue, without warning, Christ will return, and with Him the grand and complete fulfillment of all God's promises, and everyone will walk by the light of the Lord as the prophet foretold.

Is that day near? I certainly hope so, but I don't know. God only knows. But I do know this:

"Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again!"