

God's GOT A SECRET

Sermon, December 1, 2019

First Sunday of Advent

Text: Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14

Some of you may recognize the sermon title is a takeoff on that old game show, "*I've Got a Secret*," which ran 1952 through 1967. On the show the host would introduce the contestant(s); he would then ask the contestant(s) to "*whisper your secret to me, and we'll show it to the folks at home.*" The contestant(s) would then ostensibly whisper a secret in his ear, while the audience and viewers were shown the secret on the television screen; the celebrity panel would not know the secret. Each panelist had limited time to question and try to discover the secret; each segment of questioning which passed without the panelist guessing the secret would win the contestant a whopping \$10, for a top prize of \$80. A number of notables were on the show over the years, including Colonel Harland Sanders ("*I started my restaurant with my first Social Security check*"), drummer Pete Best ("*I used to be one of the Beatles*"), Army Sergeant Ira Jones ("*I was Elvis Presley's first sergeant in Germany*"), scientist Philo T. Farnsworth ("*the inventor of electronic television, who made his only televised appearance as a contestant on this show*"). Although God never appeared on the show, today's Gospel tells us He would have qualified, because He has a secret, a well-guarded secret. Jesus said, "*No one knows that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.*"

We sometimes have a tendency to lump together "secrets" and "deception," as if being secretive necessitated a degree of lying or deceitfulness. However, secrets are not a bad thing in and of themselves. In fact, it is a mark of personal integrity if you are trustworthy enough to keep a secret. 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 old enough or mature enough 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 ... 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 integrity involved in keeping a secret really is an honorable trait; in fact, it can be a divine attribute. According to our pew Bibles, even God apparently kept at least one secret ... and He even kept it from Jesus!

*"No one knows that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father."*¹ 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. When will that happen? Well, the exact *date* of that Day is not known. There are some things God only knows! "God Only Knows" calls to mind the lyrics of that old Beach Boys' 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.*" Well, 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!*" 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? 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 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 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 need for swords and spears, only plowshares and pruning hooks ... for nation shall not lift sword against

¹ It should be noted, as is mentioned in a footnote in our pew Bibles, some of the ancient Greek manuscripts of Matthew 24:36 do not include the phrase "nor the Son." Subsequently, the KJV does not include the phrase, although the NIV and ESV do. It's an interesting study for another time.

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. 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 grumbling, lazy "workers" 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, especially when working my way through college and seminary. 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 is talking about 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 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! THAT'S the sort of watchful alertness Jesus loves to see in His disciples.

We sang earlier, "*Joy to the World, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King!*" We usually think of it as a Christmas carol, but it is technically an Advent hymn, adapted from a poem written by Isaac Watts and originally entitled "*The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom.*" The words are a paraphrase of the last half of Psalm 98, which was our Call to Worship this morning. I've talked about this in years past, but did you ever wonder why it's "The Lord IS come"? Not "the Lord *has* come (*past tense*)" or "the Lord *will* come (*future tense*)," but "the Lord IS come (*present tense*)." Yes, Advent is about looking back, and we certainly celebrate in this season that the Lord HAS come. Advent is certainly about remembering how the hopes and fears of all the years were met in thee that night, o little town of Bethlehem. And yes, Advent is also about looking ahead. The Lord WILL come again. During this liturgical season we do remember the Lord HAS come, and we also remember that He WILL come as promised and also as foretold at the end of Psalm 98 "*... to judge the earth, to judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples with equity.*" This is not so much a threat as it is a glorious *consolation* ... it is the joyful and certain hope that God will indeed finish what He started, God will bring to full completion the salvation and redemption of this world He so loved so much that He sent His only begotten Son in the first place. Whether you believe it 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, though, 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 faithful and busily engaged and watchful and alert, the hope of 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 before that Day, so in the meantime, keep it up! 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! The Lord *has* come, the Lord *will* come, and Advent is also very much about *right now* ... the Lord IS come, present tense. The Bible tells us "*Today is the day of salvation.*" Not yesterday, not tomorrow; TODAY. Advent is also very much about the restoring grace and redeeming love of Jesus Who comes to us in the present tense, in the day we have, today ... and about us living each and every moment conscious of His living presence with us right now.

Paul tells us in 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 goes on to tell us to *put on* our salvation in the time we have and live into it and just put *aside* the useless, futile, destructive works of darkness. He goes on to plead in so many words, "*Don't waste time and energy and life 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. In the meantime, we are called to watchful, alert and active faithfulness ... in the day we have.