

**“Faithful Motivation” – Mat 24:36-44 – Advent 1 – Nov 27, 2016**

Whew! Did you survive Black Friday? Did you even participate? I didn't ... not even any online shopping! The main reason I didn't get involved in that spending spree was that I checked a few prices and discovered that contrary to all the advertising hoopla the sale prices weren't all that good. Elizabeth did get some good bargains at The Bay, but for me the whole event was simply a lot of advertising hype.

And of course now that that particular date has passed we are in for a deluge of advertising prompting us to ho-ho-ho, spend-spend-spend as we approach Christmas Day. That festive event of course will be closely followed by Boxing Day Specials and then New Year's Eve Sale Events, and then blessedly all the advertising hoo-ha will abate, if only temporarily. All of the ads of course try to whip up enthusiasm, to combat the very 'tuning out' that I am getting better at as the years go by. I find it harder and harder to build and maintain the excitement, especially when the noise starts earlier and earlier every year.

But the secular world is not alone, since we note a similar kind of problem in the Christian faith – a problem that Matthew recognized and to which Jesus spoke – namely the problem of getting tired of the waiting. Long before Christmas became Christmas, at least the modern-day Christmas as we know it, long before there were trees and tinsel, eggnog and office parties, long before there were lawn deer made out of tiny lights, and crowded airports and football scrums in huge retail stores, long before all that commotion Matthew recognized the problem of the excitement of the faithful beginning to wear a bit thin.

That particular problem arose because in those early days of the church the faithful were filled with the excited anticipation of Christ's promised return. When people gathered in worship they would look over their shoulder, sure that this would be the moment Jesus would reappear. Unusual cloud formations, storms, volcanoes, locust plagues – all were seen as sure signs the end was at hand, undeniable indicators that Christ stood ready to make a heaven-and-earth-shaking cosmic-scale re-entry. Great excitement was everywhere in the faith.

But you can only keep up that kind of excitement so long. Doing that is hard work! It takes a lot of energy, a lot of emotional commitment to keep yourself on the edge of your seat for a month, or two. How about a year? What about ten years – could you keep the same level of excitement up for ten years? I'm sure I couldn't! It's exhausting work to keep up a high level of excited anticipation. I've even seen people fail to keep up that high level of excited anticipation all the way through the seventeen minutes of a sermon!

Naturally enough people start to tire, to lose some of the excitement. Some even start to question why all the fuss, and begin to drift away. It doesn't matter whether the focus of a group is religion, or politics, or dancing, or a book club, or a new building, or whatever – keeping the group excited and motivated is always a balancing act. Not enough anticipation, and people lose interest. Too much anticipation for too long, and people lose strength, and then lose interest.

Leaders have always been challenged by keeping people motivated ever since people began to congregate in groups of two or more. They have tried various techniques over the countless ages. Those techniques, however varied, fall into only a few categories, primarily into two: being either a 'stick' or a 'carrot'; a lure or a coercion. Political leaders often use financial lures as their carrot. This works particularly well in politics, as the leaders are not offering their own resources – they are able to draw in the voters using the voters' own money! Offering such financial lures – bribes, if you will, does however raise a number of problems, and not just the legal or ethical ones. Perhaps the greatest problem with bribery is that of escalating expectations – or as my mother used to put it: “much wants more”. The bribe that works today is usually not

enough for tomorrow, and a purchased allegiance is pretty shallow – excitement created by bribery usually turns very quickly to disappointment and resentment.

Scaring people is the second common way to motivate people, and that is essentially the approach we hear in this reading from Matthew's gospel. "Keep awake!" is the warning, with a not-so-subtle implication that danger, tragedy, catastrophe will strike if you don't keep awake. Just prior to the warnings given here in today's reading, Jesus has spoken at some length about the signs that will accompany his return, signs that include major cosmic disruptions. He was responding to a question from his disciples about when he would return, and cautioned them several times about being on the alert for false prophets and imposters pretending to be him. Jesus also cautioned them against trying to predict exactly when that will happen. "Nobody knows when that will happen – neither angels of heaven nor the Son – only God knows." Now, people don't like having uncertain times hanging over them. Especially in this age when the majority of people worship science and reason and rationality we are not happy with "only God knows." Matthew – ever ready to use scare tactics and to issue warnings – is not content to leave it there either, and so he includes other teachings of Jesus to expand on the subject.

To his original readers, who were slacking off from their avid faithful anticipation and beginning to simply live life, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, Matthew provides a reminder that that was just what the people of Noah's day were doing when the Flood took them (literally!) by surprise. The message is fearfully clear: not just "keep watch!" but "watch out!"

Things are a little less drastic with the second warning. Compared to the 99.999% catastrophe rate of the Flood, and perhaps recalling God's rainbow covenant that he wouldn't do that again, the second warning gives people a 50/50 chance – with perhaps the other guy in the field being taken, or the other woman grinding grain disappearing. Quite the opposite of today's popular view of the rapture, the idea here is to keep watch so as NOT to be the one taken by surprise!

Frankly, I have a bit of trouble with the optics of the third example of why you should keep awake. I can see how a motivational speaker getting wound up on the topic of staying alert could include the example of watching to prevent a thief in the night from robbing you, but the implied parallel between the promised return of Christ and a thief in the night seems to me to be at best a very odd connection, which perhaps explains the somewhat lame conclusion that restates the obvious, "you must be ready".

Scare tactics often work, and are effective over a much longer time than bribery, but scare tactics still have a limited lifetime. As long as there is some element of fear, people will still heed the warnings. But as more and more time goes by, and nothing drastic has happened, the fear gradually subsides until the warnings have little, if any, remaining effect. Now that the earth has orbited the sun more than two thousand times since Matthew committed these warnings to paper, a lot of time has gone by with only the usual catastrophes – storms, earthquakes, wars, famines, plagues and other assorted nastiness. The fear of the day of the Lord has pretty much dwindled down to either a topic for theological study, or a misguided focus of bizarre sects.

How then can we be motivated to maintain our vigilance in faith? What would work to keep us alert to the return of Christ? I suggest that the one motivator that is timeless, that can keep us looking forward in positive anticipation is hope. Far from seeing the day of the Lord as a moment of doom and destruction, perhaps we can see it as a surprise gift, a blissful release from the usual catastrophes of life. Yes, the day of the Lord is a cosmic moment of judgment, but it is also for us the moment when with Christ's protection and blessing all believers are

ushered into the presence of God, into the assembly of the great host joyfully praising God, freed from the burdens of tears and pain and sorrow. Once you strip away the fearful anticipation, it sounds like a pretty good gift.

When will that happen? Only God knows – we have that from Jesus himself. It might be before lunch today. Some might hope it would be just before the offering! Or just before bedtime. Or in the middle of the night. Or maybe next year. Or perhaps two thousand years from now. “Not possible!”, you say? That’s probably what Matthew and more than a few of the early Christians said two thousand years ago. Ten thousand years from now? Who knows? God knows, and only God knows, Jesus said. For each of us that moment will come at some point – God willing it won’t be from being hit by a bus on the way home from this service, but at some moment, unexpected or not, we will come face to face with our Lord, and it certainly would be a good idea to be as prepared as possible.

So, how to fill the time until then? Live in constant fear? Nope! Panic at every imagined sign? I don’t think so. Ignore the possibility? Not practical, either. I would suggest one of the best ways is to keep busy. Being busy really helps the time go by in a hurry. But I don’t mean just busy at the normal stuff of life – I’m suggesting keeping busy at the joyful tasks of faith: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the lonely and fearful, healing the sick, supporting the weak, practicing good to displace evil, proclaiming the love of God in Christ for all.

By all means, stay alert, keep awake in your faith, but live your life not in fear but with an abounding hope, certain that Christ will not let you go, that he will one day welcome you into his open arms, safe and secure on the day of the Lord, whenever that might be.