

On Paying Attention – John Brittingham

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Alright Nerds: Tradition dictates that, as far as the delivery of the contemporary American sermon is concerned, the one delivering said sermon begins with something of a pithy remark, a witty phrase, or a humorous anecdote. We can infer from this convention of American religious rhetorical performance that one reason why this convention came into being was to pacify uneasy congregants. In other words, even if my theology is fit for the darkest recesses of a compost bin, at least you know that I can be funny. So, in keeping with the conventions of form, I should perhaps quit my dawdling or philosophical navel-gazing and get on with the joke and/or funny story. So here it is:

During my time in Boston, I witnessed the neuroses of northeastern academics in full force. Scholarly gatherings in the so-called “Athens of America” offered no shortage of rehashed stories, delectable bourgeois-y cheeses, and oceans of tweed. (Dockers could sustain its business until the end of time merely selling brown blazers with elbow patches to members of the intelligentsia.) At one of these aforementioned functions, a paper was being delivered by someone who we’ll call the Revered Elder Scholar. The RES commanded such respect from the academic community that even the most misanthropic of professorial types decided to show up. One such cantankerous-older-scholarly-type decided that he would place himself directly in front of the RES and subsequently and shamelessly fall asleep. Head tilted back, mouth fully agape, and perhaps even a small pool of saliva collecting along the top edge of his collar, this academic malfeasant slumbered all the way through the delivery of the academic sermon known as the Conference Presentation. Then, almost as if the RES concluding remarks were “Arise, O Sleeper” the slumbering professor sprung to life and shot his hand up immediately to ask a question which amounted to little more than “why are you not doing what I do and why don’t you think what I think” quickly returning to his slumber before the answer was complete.

I guess it’s not that funny of an anecdote and borders on that precarious territory of the worst of unfunny jokes—the general region of “I guess you had to be there”—which finds itself located somewhere in the vicinity of endlessly embarrassing dad jokes. Still, we can remain with this little story a bit and attempt to mine it for sermonic gold (as it were), those little nuggets of analogy that make transitions between humorous overtures and expository meditations on the lectionary passages much, much easier.

One such nugget might be to point out how this anecdote deals with a man who was not someone who heeded the words of Jesus and “kept awake.” Such a nugget is exemplary of the allusory transition—I’m making that name up all by myself, perhaps a testimony to the fact that I

barely know what I'm doing—a transition wherein the contemporary colloquial remark is given a heightened sense of meaning because it is conveyed in such a way that it alludes to a fairly obvious line or motif or theme or what-have-you. Perhaps this particular nugget is a little too obvious, too easy to digest. The sleepy bespectacled scholarly-type gentleman didn't keep awake and he probably missed something and in the last line of scripture that we heard before this sermon began we heard Jesus—who's important or something—charging us with a command to keep awake because, like one who has just wrenched himself from the comforting grasp of peaceful sleep, we know neither the day nor the hour.

Yet, this meditation on the idea of alluding to a prevalent motif has already accomplished the very job it was supposed to. No longer are we really thinking about the conventions of the contemporary American sermon—whether in media saturated environs or in the most academic of religious contexts—and we're thinking about that last line of Jesus'. "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Certainly, this line has been abused time and again as an admonition to always be at the ready for the return of the LORD who comes like a thief in the night. A return in which Jesus—who, in apocalyptic passages, I always envision riding a brilliant white unicorn, wielding a blue lightsaber, and striking any number of Napoleonic poses—sneaks up on the world and kidnaps a lot of people in what might amount to the greatest "gotcha" prank of history. Granted, this might be an anachronistic approach to the parousia or second coming of Jesus, but it's no more anachronistic a thought as the thoughts of those who adhere to a certain mid-19th century theology that lays exclusive claim to the correct interpretation of these passages while remaining wholly unaware of its own historical development.

However, while all this talk of eschatology and sneaky second comings is rather exciting in a world that can be seen, at times, to be beset by crises on all sides, be they economic, political, educational, emotional, communal, environmental, ethical, etc., a world that appears to be begging for some kind of release from all of the ills that plague its fragile surface, I want to bring our attention to something perhaps a little bit ordinary: Paying attention. Paying attention is something that is perhaps too ordinary—oh yes, yes, we must pay attention to the sermon, we must listen to our lives, we must keep our eyes open at the wonder of the world around us, we must make sure we notice those versus on the other side of the page in our hymnal, paying attention, yes, all fine and good—perhaps something too familiar for us to notice how strange it is. Perhaps too familiar for us to notice how crucial it is. For, as seems to be the case in our lectionary readings, our role as witnesses depends heavily upon our ability to pay attention. So we'll hold all of this sexy parousia-talk in abeyance and look at how peculiar and important this very ordinary idea of paying attention is for the texts our lectionary selection has set before us this Sunday.

If we look all the way back to our Joshua passage, we see what appears on the surface to be a very cliched Judeo-Christian message: Choose who you serve. Either you choose God or you choose some schmuck with 15 eyes and octopus tentacles. The God of Israel is all sweetness and light and a wee bit-o-wrath, all those other gods are raw sewage. But if we peel back those

layers of theological sedimentation, we begin to see more than just the issuing of an ultimatum. We begin to see an admonition to be attentive.

The lectionary text begins with Joshua calling something of a town meeting. All of the elders, the heads, the judges, the officers, the VIPs, the dignitaries, members of the Manna lobby, and the Jericho Demolition Co. and begins to prophesy before them. "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel", that oft-repeated prophetic invocation being the first words brought forth from Joshua's mouth, these BFDs know (BFD here being short for Big ____ Deal. Insert your own f-word), this is not going to be a pleasant experience. But Joshua doesn't merely run down a list of 95 theses concerning the faults of Israel; no, he begins by telling the Israelites who they are and who they have been. They used to be those who dwelt beyond the river and then God moved them—through Abraham—into Canaan. While our lectionary passage skips the rest of the story, suffice it to say that it's a roller-coaster ride from there. Captivity here, liberation there, the good, the bad, the ugly, and everything in-between—all the constituent parts for a good Exodus story.

Then we get to the Big Speech. "Put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the LORD." Leave behind a past that does you no good. It is done, you've crossed the river and cannot cross it again. Yet, he does not stop with the past. Turning from talking about who they have been, Joshua tells this gathering of BFDs that they cannot just wait around for the latest god on the market to catch their eye, as though human beings were little more than passive subjects worshiping whatever flashy new notion of The Divine dances before their eyes. For Joshua, even passive adherence to religious devotion involves some kind of choice. "Look", he says, "you can still serve those old betamax gods from beyond the river, or you could serve the Google Cloud of Unknowing from the land in which you are living, but you have to realize that you are going to serve somebody." If you're not paying attention, you will not realize that you aren't merely worshiping, you're worshiping someone or something. Maybe you didn't realize you have a choice, but you do and you need to pay attention to the fact that you have a choice in the matter. Not that the choice is without consequences, but consequences are always already a part of the choice. This is why you need to pay attention."

This idea of paying attention to the ways in which we worship or serve something or someone is touched upon by the late writer/philosopher/all around creative juggernaut David Foster Wallace. In "This is Water", his commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005 he says this about this very idea of paying attention to who or what you worship:

"...in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and

you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings.

They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing."

That there's something of an affinity between Wallace's admonition to be attentive to who we worship and Joshua's prophetic call is obvious. Even in our passive and increasingly busy day-to-day lives, we are engaged in acts of worship, tacitly complicit in serving structures of power, oppression, injustice, and sometimes even evil, because we're not fully paying attention to what is going on around us and in us. We, like the Isrealites standing before Joshua, are constantly tempted to fall back into that default setting of serving those same old gods we've always served or adopting the gods of the land we inhabit. Yet, if we are paying attention, if we are keeping awake like Paul and Jesus implore us to, then we begin to see that who or what we serve, and that such wakefulness requires a couple of things. It requires those words that populate the early part of the book of Joshua: Strength and Courage. Keeping awake requires the strength to persist in the difficult and perpetual and exceedingly and excruciatingly boring work of paying attention again and again, day after week after month after year. And the work of paying attention requires the courage to see the truth that surrounds us in all of its messiness and complexity and fearful majesty.

It is at this point in the sermon, given that I've devoted so much time to this Joshua passage, that the very words used in the previous paragraph serve to contaminate the vocabulary of the so-called "old testament" with Pauline language. Such rhetorical choices are employed largely for the explicit reason of moving things along and transitioning to a more (quote unquote) "new testament" discussion of this very idea of paying attention. Of course, if you've been paying attention—that is, doing the very thing I'm encouraging you to do—then you've probably already realized this and begun to run through that ongoing dialogue inside your head which might go from wondering where I'm going with this, to thinking about how annoying this whole cutesy quasi-postmodern meta-sermon stuff is (which I apologize for but, as Herman Melville once said, "write another way I cannot") , to thinking about what you're going to eat for lunch (potluck is next Sunday), to who the Bears playing this week (it's the Eagles). Such is our default-setting and it takes hard work to get beyond merely listening to our behind-the-eyes playlist.

In fact, it is, at times, too difficult for us. Habituated to be perpetually distracted by all the seemingly necessary things in our lives, we lose the ability to cultivate what Kierkegaard called “inwardness.” (A brief aside: At this point, I tally my use of “Obligatory References for a St. Paul’s Sermon” at 2 out of 7–1) being a simultaneous embrace and rebuke of the fact that I am an academic in a largely academic setting and, 2) because I’m a philosopher, a reference to Kierkegaard. All I’m missing is a reference to St. Louis sports, a Sam Wells vocab word, a Hauerwas quote, a reminder that we need community, and maybe the optional short exegesis on a selection from our Hymnal penned by one or more of the Wesleys. We’ll see if I get this done.)

The cultivation of inwardness—the ability to really pay attention to what is going on inside of us—requires a context that supports such inwardness. That is, it requires a community which allows us to keep awake. Take, for example, the parable that Jesus tells us in our Gospel passage, about the ten bridesmaids. The role of these bridesmaids cannot be understood just from a literal reading of the text. One has to pay attention to the historical practices of weddings to realize who exactly these bridesmaids are. They are not merely a group of ladies in oddly-shaped-one-use-only-never-wear-in-public-fuchsia-and-other-assorted-Lisa Frank-colored dresses. The bridesmaids that Jesus is talking about are charged with the ministry of hospitality. They are charged with keeping the flame alive, as it were, for the coming of the bridegroom. They know who they serve and they are known by who they serve. They are known as bridesmaids, as those who serve the bridegroom and not themselves. And they are a community of servants who keep a persistent vigil, illuminating the uncertainty of night with their lamps.

The work of paying attention to what is going on inside of us and to what is going on around us requires a community of people who encourage us to name the obvious all around us, to come alongside us in the pursuit of those practices which help in keeping awake and preparing the way for the coming of the bridegroom. This community is known not by its claim to being bridesmaids, nor by any hereditary inheritance of once serving the bridegroom, but by its commitment to those practices of keeping watch for the coming of the Bridegroom. Who they serve is evident in what they do. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the Bridegroom sees those Bridesmaids who did not keep enough oil for their lanterns as a people who he does not know. The community whose identity is found in the work of hospitality, in those difficult and perpetual and exceedingly and excruciatingly boring practices of paying attention again and again, day after week after month after year.

The work of paying attention, of keeping awake requires more than we alone are able to accomplish on our own. It requires a community that has covenanted itself to serve Jesus and not the gods of the past or the gods of the present age. It requires the strength that comes from those communal practices that reveal to us who we are and who we really serve. It involves confession and prayer, vigilance, and careful preparation for the parousia, the second coming of Jesus, the Bridegroom. It requires all of this because, as Paul tells us, we know neither the day nor the hour.

Therefore, as the beloved community of those called by God, let us keep awake and alert, paying close attention to the wonderous world arrayed in splendor around us, and the awesome mystery of the work of God within us and within each other.