

“Watch!”

In the name of him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, dear friends in Christ: There’s no mistaking the main point that Jesus is attempting to impress upon his followers in this morning’s Gospel lesson. Five times in this very short section he warns us to watch, to be on guard, to be alert and ready at all times because, as he says, you don’t want him to find you sleeping at the time when he returns. From the fact that he says it five times we can draw two important conclusions: that he’s extremely emphatic about it, and that about this issue he is deadly serious. That being the case, we should sit up, take notice and be equally emphatic and serious about it.

Now, in the past when treating this same subject, it’s been natural for me to retreat to my former experience and draw examples and illustrations from the military service. And so I’ve talked about soldiers standing guard, watching, waiting, hunkered down in foxholes waiting for the enemy to appear, that sort of thing. And it makes sense: soldiers are always guarding or watching something. It’s an essential part of the job. It’s also one of the most mind numbingly dull duties imaginable. And so the parallels I’ve drawn in the past have been mostly about strategies to deal with hard task of trying to stay alert and ready during the long watches of the night – and that’s okay as far as it goes: there’s plenty to be mined there. But the military model has certain limitations. That kind of guard duty is inherently passive. Soldiers on guard don’t act; they’re supposed to be ready to react. They watch and wait for something to happen and then respond to it. But when Jesus tells us to watch and be alert, he has something more in mind. We’re not to be standing around like sentries waiting for his return; no, he would have us keep watch in a much more active way.

It’s said that Martin Luther was once asked by one of his students how he would spend the day if knew for certain that the next day the Lord would return. Doubtless the student expected him to say something very pious: that he would spend hours in prayer, go to confession, attempt to settle accounts with people he had offended, give away all his worldly possessions to help the poor, and go about urging others to similarly prepare themselves for the Lord’s coming. (And just an aside here, it’s not a bad exercise to answer the question yourself. What would you do if you knew for certain that the next twenty-four hours would be your last on earth? Anyway,) in answer to the question, Luther astonished his listeners by saying that he would plant an apple tree.

On the surface, that doesn’t seem to make much sense. Everybody knows that it takes many years for an apple tree to grow enough to come into production – and if there’s no time left, what’s the point? It would seem like so much wasted effort, effort that might have been better spent on something that would make more of a difference. But Luther didn’t mean that he would deliberately go out of his way to do something unimportant. His point was that he wouldn’t change anything. He lived each day in the expectation of Christ’s return. He was alert and on guard for it at all times, and so he would go on doing exactly what he had been doing. And since he’d planned to work in his garden and plant an apple tree that day, that’s what he’d go ahead and do. Luther was saying that since he was daily within God’s will, going about the tasks and duties God had given him to do, the certain knowledge that the world would end tomorrow would not change his plans. And by extension he was telling his students (and us) that if such knowledge *would* change *your* plans, then you’re not alert and ready as Christ calls us to be.

And with this in mind, I’d like to borrow some lessons about being ready at all times from our friends in the animal kingdom. When I was growing up, pretty much every Sunday evening we would watch *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*. I suppose it was sort of a family ritual. Through the miracle of modern technology, we would spend one hour each week on safari in Africa with host Marlin Perkins and his able assistant, Jim. We especially liked the way that Marlin always stayed safely behind the camera and narrated while Jim did all the dangerous stuff. Poor Jim seems like he was forever standing in front of charging rhinoceroses, wrestling crocodiles, or handling deadly pythons. Better still, whenever they’d show a scene like that, they’d cut to a commercial for Mutual of Omaha, and Marlin would incorporate what you just watched into an ad for one of their products. “That lion nearly chewed Jim’s arm off! Good thing for Jim that if it had, he’s covered by Mutual of Omaha’s accident insurance with double indemnity for loss of limbs. What about you? Would you be protected if a lion chewed off your arm?” (Hmmm ... I’m ashamed to admit I never thought about it.)

Anyway, back to the animals, by watching shows like those you learn a lot about all those herd animals out on the African savannahs: the zebras, wildebeests, antelopes and gazelles, and all their cousins that spend their days grazing and looking for water. They just go about their business doing whatever it is they do; but at the same time they're always keeping a watch out for the lions and the other carnivores. This is a good analogy for us because the Scriptures warn that the devil goes about like a roaring lion looking for whomever he can devour.

Now, very often it happens that as the herd goes about its business, the lions sit at a distance in plain sight of them. The herd knows where they are, they maintain a respectful distance, and they keep an eye on them. And as long as they're sitting over there together, the herd is safe – at least from them. But they always keep one eye on them. At the same time, they're alert for other threats. Never know what might be hiding in the tall grass on the other side. It's the threat you don't see coming that gets you. And if the herd looks over and sees that a few of the lions that were sitting over there a while ago are suddenly missing, they know it's time to go on high alert.

It's this way with us in the church. We know where the dangers are out there – at least most of them. We know what kinds of tricks and traps and temptations Satan uses to capture people and steal them away from the saving faith. We keep an eye on them and maintain a proper distance. They're not a problem for us as long as they're not close. But we also know that if we lose sight of them, there's going to be trouble. So, we never forget about them, and we constantly review them. At the same time, we're also watching for the unexpected unseen threats – the ones that may be crouching nearby.

Well, you know if you've ever watched these animal shows that very often there's one critter that seems to be out of sync with the rest. This is the one that keeps wandering off by itself, lingering at the watering hole after the others have pretty well moved on, and who keeps looking for a patch of grass that's a bit greener or less trampled on which to graze. That's the one who thinks he can take care of himself – that he doesn't so much need the protection that the herd provides. Of course, that's the one that usually gets snatched up first by the lions. On his own he's at a decided disadvantage because he's removed himself from broader collective vision of the herd. He can't see all the threats and go on grazing at the same time; nor can he rely on the others for defense when the lions attack. Because he's alone the lions can surround him and come at him from all sides. They'll make short work of him.

It's the same way with the church. Some folks feel they can wander away from the collective body and still be just as safe as those who stay with it. They're wrong. And it's more than just mindless conformity I'm talking about here. The Christian Church *is* the body of Christ. When we distance ourselves from it, from the proclaimed Word, from the Sacraments, from the fellowship and mutual support of the saints, we are distancing ourselves from Christ who is the head of the Church. We cut ourselves off from the Living Water and the Green Pastures than only he can provide. Such a person is going to be spiritually malnourished, which in turn will only make him easier prey for Satan.

Staying with the herd has added benefit of the protection provided by the designated lookouts. In every herd there are certain larger and more mature animals who hang around the edges of the group. They have experience. They know what it takes to survive. They also know how to read the signs. They watch out not only for the lions, but they also watch the other herds of animals and the birds to see what they're doing. They know that unusual movements among them indicate potential trouble.

So, it is in the church. Christ gives us pastors, elders, teachers, and other spiritual parents who have more training or maturity in the faith. When a threat appears, any member of the Church can and should sound the alarm; but it's given to some to be more alert and to watch for things that others might miss until it's too late. In my own work as a pastor, I often keep an eye on not just what's going on in this church or our church body, but also in others. What issues and questions are they struggling with? And how is it affecting them? Based on these observations, I'm able to warn this group about potential threats on the horizon. And even in this work, I'm not on my own. I have the benefit of an entire network of fellow pastors, teachers, and other theologians who are watching the same things and reporting what they see. That's why it's a little frustrating sometimes when I issue a warning about the doubtful spiritual value of something or how it may be

potentially harmful and the response I get is, “Yeah, well I don’t see a problem with it.” Not that I’m incapable of making a mistake, but it could be because I’ve been trained to know what to look for.

Be that as it may, even with all the watching for threats and danger, there are times when the herd comes under direct attack and it has to make the choice of fight or flight. Sometimes it’s best to run from the lions. Other times it’s better to form up and face them head on. The bigger, stronger members of the herd form up shoulder to shoulder like a wall, with the younger, weaker members protected on the inside. No lion will charge under those conditions. They back off and wait for a more opportune target.

And so it is with the Church. Sometimes the ground is not worth defending. There are issues of what we call *Adiaphora*, things neither commanded nor forbidden by God. On such issues we can freely maneuver. But there are other times when the Church has to take a stand. This happens whenever the truths of God’s Word or the solid doctrines drawn from them come under attack. Then keeping watch means standing our ground and defending the truth with our lives if necessary. And this, of course, is a whole lot easier when we stand shoulder to shoulder in a united front. If certain members of the outer wall lose their nerve and break and run, everyone is a greater risk.

And one more parallel I’d like to draw here; this one not from the African savannah but from our own American West. In my travels throughout the Dakotas and Montana, and even western Nebraska, I’ve come across what are called buffalo jumps. I’ll bet some of you know what I’m talking about. In the old days, the plains Indians depended mostly on buffalo for meat, for clothing, and for shelter. But before they had rifles, hunting buffalo was very risky business. An enraged bull with a few arrows and a spear or two stuck in his side might easily take a few braves with him before he went down. So, one of the ways the Indians developed to kill large numbers of buffalo with very little danger to themselves was to spook them and try to direct the stampede toward a place where the ground fell off suddenly in a cliff or an escarpment. The idea was to rely on a combination of gravity and the extremely inefficient aerodynamic flight properties of buffalo to do the job for them. As the terrified animals ran along, all the while being driven by whooping Indians, they wouldn’t know that they were running into a trap until it was too late. By the time the ones in the front saw the danger they wouldn’t be able to stop. They would be carried over the edge by their own momentum or pushed over by the others behind them who were still oblivious to the danger. All that remained for the Indians to do was climb down the cliff and club the wounded survivors to death.

And with this in mind, something else we need to watch out for is when the entire Church is running along at full speed, being driven not by God’s Word; but directed and steered by hunters who are hoping to do massive damage in the most efficient way. We see a lot of this going on today as churches pursue various fads and gimmicks that have the appearance of biblical truth but that lack key components of its substance. Part of watching involves sticking steadfastly with the tried and true, and proceeding with caution and careful deliberation with what claims to be new and innovative.

In summary, watching as Jesus warns us to do is not just sitting idly and waiting for something to happen. It is instead an attitude of wariness and expectation that we maintain as we go about all the other duties and responsibilities we have in our respective callings. We need to be aware of the threats out there and be on our guard against them, *and at the same time* we need to be about the Lord’s business as we anticipate his second coming. The goal is to be found ready and occupied in his will at all times – that way we can be sure that that’s how he’ll find us when he returns. And as we do this, we are not on our own. We have the support of the Body of Christ that surrounds us. In the Church of Christ, we rely on each other. But even more importantly, as we draw near to Jesus through the means that he has provided to his Church, through Baptism, through his saving Gospel, and through his Holy Supper, Christ who is our head watches out for us. By these means he forgives our sin and keeps us strong in the faith. By them he is at work to watch over and keep us in him to the end *and beyond*. And we can be certain of this, for he has promised that none that are his will be lost. Because he is watching out for us, we can be sure that no one will be able to snatch us out of his hand – and that’s better insurance than Mutual of Omaha could ever provide. Therefore, to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!