

It is the Second Sunday of Advent, and as the days grow shorter and the nights grow colder we continue to concentrate on the seasonal themes of preparation and anticipation. For me those themes are best summed up in one of the sentences of scripture appointed for the beginning of Morning Prayer during Advent. The words are from the thirteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, and here are those words: "Watch, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep."

Watch.

That exhortation could cover a lot of territory. Following the tragic, and sadly all too familiar events in San Bernardino on Wednesday, I believe we are once again in a state of heightened consciousness. We're watching and we're wondering, "Where will it happen next? How many days will it be before it happens again?" By now we know it will happen again, so we're watching, watching to see where.

And I hope that as we're watching we are also examining our own attitudes about violence and our position on gun control legislation, and asking ourselves what we can do to help bring about change rather than just wringing our hands and talking about how awful and senseless the carnage is.

The exhortation to watch could apply to other areas, as well. It could apply to geo-political situations around the world, to the instability of some governments and to the repressive, inhumane practices of others. It could apply to the plight of refugees, or to the women and children who have been snared in the cruel web of human trafficking. It could apply to the never-ending fighting and killing in the Middle East, or to fragile economic conditions that leave some people terrified about their future. Or maybe we should be watching geological and meteorological events — earthquakes, changes in weather patterns, volcanic eruptions, mighty floods.

The exhortation to watch might cover all of those things, but whatever else it means, I believe it means, "Watch yourself."

None of us knows when the master of the house will come, so we need to watch ourselves.

John, the son of Zechariah, was a person who took that exhortation seriously, and I believe that's why he stands out so distinctively for those of us who read the God-story. It's not that we're fascinated by him because he was so colorful or so eccentric. John the Baptist stands out as we listen to the story because he is a wonderful model for living — a model characterized by clarity of purpose and focus and resolve. John is a wonderful model because he spoke with great authority — not an authority he claimed as his own, but an authority that came through the message he preached. John the Baptist didn't mince words. He preached Jesus Christ, he preached repentance, he preached amendment of life — and for a lot of people, the message was too hard to hear. But John didn't apologize and he didn't compromise anything he had to say. He was clear on what he had been called to do, and he did it.

I believe there are times when you and I could take a lesson — come what may. John the Baptist stands out for us because he gave his life — literally — for the work he was born to do.

Not that any of us should be eager to rush out to die for a cause, but there's something attractive about the ability to invest completely, without qualification and without reserve. There were no excuses about needing to bury parents or plow fields or get the kids through school, and John didn't ask for any signs or assurances. He accepted the call — the same call, by the way, that came to you and me through Baptism. He accepted the call and he went to work. He went to work with an undiluted devotion, with clarity of purpose, and focus and resolve.

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Another thing that makes John the Baptist such a good model for living is the thing I really want us to look at today. It's a characteristic that stands out so clearly in the story of John's life, and that is that John the Baptist never sought to draw attention to himself. He may have been wild looking and he was a fiery preacher, but he always pointed beyond himself to God in Jesus Christ, always, in everything he said or did. Aren't there times when we could take a lesson?

We all point somewhere with the living of our lives — to some one or to some thing. And if that's true, Advent is the perfect season for asking ourselves to whom or what we point. Some people point to the acquisition and use of power. They might say, "Decide what you want in life and go after it. Don't trust anyone, and don't let anyone or anything stop you until you've reached your goal." There is certainly nothing wrong with setting goals or striving for success, but that kind of talk does not point to God in Christ. Some people point to material possessions — things they unconsciously think will make them feel good about themselves and about how they're doing in life. Those material things aren't evil, and there can be a balanced and healthy use and enjoyment of those things, but the compulsive stockpiling of bigger and better and more and more and more doesn't point to God in Christ. Some people point to themselves with the living of their lives — "I, me, mine." "Do you think I look younger when I wear my hair this way?" Or, "Why does everything bad always happen to me?" Or "I work so hard and I'm so unappreciated." Knowledge of self and love of self are crucial to spiritual and emotional health and wholeness, but that kind of distorted self-centeredness does not point to God in Christ.

We all stand for something, and we all point somewhere — to ourselves, to another person, to things, to ideas — we all point somewhere in everything we think and say and do. Now is the time for asking what moves us and inspires us and guides us in our pointing.

Now is the time for remembering that the One for whom we wait is the One to whom we are called to point.

Repentance, forgiveness, amendment of life;
Clarity of purpose, focus, resolve.

We need the season of Advent. Let the rest of the world go crazy with its holiday hysteria. We need the season of Advent so that at the Christ Mass we will be able to see and to recognize and to embrace the salvation of God.

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