

August 7th, 2022

Year C; Proper 14

Psalm 50: 1-8, 23-24

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

Luke 12: 32-40

Luke 12:32-40

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

"But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

No one can be constantly on alert.

When we lived in Richmond we lived in a neighborhood of old growth trees, wonderful towering oaks and pines, maples and tulip poplars. All providing generous shade in every yard, always a spot to get out of the blazing sun.

We loved our trees, we chose that house in part because of its trees, but when storms came, thunderstorms, hurricanes, derechos, tornadoes, I was

very watchful, on high alert about all those trees towering around us.

When stormy weather was predicted, I would watch as dusk fell, alert to any tree in our yard that might be bending too much, or ready to lose a big branch. I would lie in bed, listening to the wind and the creaking of our trees, staying awake, somehow thinking my listening might keep the trees upright.

As Hurricane Isabel heading for Virginia, Tim's brother Seth and his girlfriend came to our house from Norfolk, parking their camper in our driveway. And Tim and Seth went out after darkness fell and the winds howled, and watch our neighbor Betty's giant pine oak, bend and sway, spotlighting that tree, highly alert.

Many of the grand old trees in our neighborhood did fall in our 15 years living there. But the worst instance of a tree falling for us came on a beautiful, clear night in October, without even a breath of wind. A beautiful October day with a cool morning and a warm afternoon. A chance to do a bit of work in the yard, raking leaves as the great falling of leaves had started in all of our magnificent trees.

That night we went to bed, relaxing and enjoying the cool air coming in the window positioned perfectly above our bed, the cool air and the sound of traffic on I-95 lulling us off to sleep quickly, with not one thought about our towering trees, not one second of sleep lost worrying about, watching those trees out the window. The trees were still. Why watch?

And a little after 2am a giant, double trunked oak tree in our neighbor's yard fell onto our house, landing right next to our open bedroom window, a massive crashing sound waking us and a blinding flash of light and sparks as the tree's descent brought down all the electric wires going into our house.

All of my careful watching and a tree falls on a night when there was no storm, no wind; and, according to the firemen, police and Dominion Power who arrived in record time when we called 911, nothing else happening in Richmond that night. The quietest of nights and a tree falls.

Clearly my work at tree watching had done us no good.

Our gospel today tells us to be watchful and alert, but it also tells us to not be afraid. So maybe we are called to be alert, not to watch for danger all around, but to pay attention, be alert, to God and God's doings in our world.

We need to notice, to not miss, that in our reading those who are alert and watching, do not do so to avoid punishment, but rather to draw closer to God. When the master returns from the wedding feast, those who are waiting and awake are invited to sit down and receive a meal served by the master.

Many years ago, our niece Peggy was visiting our house with her little boys, Max and Wesley, at that time perhaps 3 and 5 years. Peggy and I went to the grocery store, a nice break for her from constant conversations with toddlers. As I pulled into a parking spot, Peggy interrupted herself, as she was telling me news of her parents, to suddenly point and call out: "Look, an airplane!"

She immediately laughed at herself, as she realized that she was so keenly tuned into and awake to the beloved experiences of her sons-- seeing airplanes in the sky, watching a bulldozer dig, or catching a glimpse of a fire truck-- that she noticed them, even when the boys were not nearby.

Two commentators explained this tuning in so well:

To tirelessly search the horizon for the ways in which God is coming into the world, and to see that light is shining in the darkness—that God is at work bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free.

The signs may be off in the distance, or camouflaged by distractions. But they are there, we trust and pray—and by the grace of God, with the eyes and ears of faith, and with one another's help in congregations of looking and listening, we can and will perceive them. (Matthew Myer Boulton and Elizabeth Myer Boulton, Christian Century, January 2013)

We as Christians together, as "congregations of looking and listening", are called to be awake, to be alert to what matters to God, what is beloved by our God.

So then, when this reading reminds us to be awake and watching, what are we to look for, what ought we notice? What is beloved by our God?

Did you see me, Jesus said to his friends, I was there. Where, they asked? Among the hungry, the tired, the sick, the discouraged, the frightened, the cold and shivering, the strangers.

Oh! So, our job is not to stay up all night worrying and watching and alert to danger, trying to keep the trees standing by losing sleep.

No, we are called as Christians to be alert, to watch for what is beloved, what is at God's heart, and we are invited to join God there, to put our treasure there.

Do we do this to be "good"? To avoid punishment? No, we are invited, remember? And we are invited because when we are tuned into where God's heart is, just as much as Peggy watched for every airplane to share with her little sons, when our eyes are open to notice who around us needs help, who needs encouragement, who needs hope. Then we are invited also to the feast, to the community and the joy of being God's people.

I worked very hard to keep an eye on those trees, to no avail. And maybe like me, you feel you don't have what is needed to train your eyes and ears to tune into what is beloved by God. The job might sound too big, too difficult.

In our Epistle reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, Paul speaks of faith and reminds his readers, and us, that Abraham, the greatest of prophets, by faith set off from home, in his old age:

"...and he set out, not knowing where he was going."

And Paul goes on to speak of the generations that came from Abraham and Sarah, stepping out on faith to places they did not know. And that skills and readiness and strength were not asked for, only willingness to try, to take the first steps, in faith.

And in fact, Paul cannot resist noting about Abraham:

"Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of

sand by the seashore.”

A bit tactless of Paul to refer to the Prophet Abraham in his old age, as ‘one as good as dead’.

But Paul has a point: this really was the man for God to call? Someone so old, he is as good as dead?

Oh, well, maybe then God is calling me too: tired, cynical, too old...me, us?

When Tim and I moved to the Northern Neck and bought a house, one of my criteria for the house was, no large trees around it! I was done with tree watching in the night, and realized that worrying ahead did no good.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

We are invited to join God in learning what is beloved, what is most important to God, and then by faith to follow God: feeding, helping, encouraging, praying. And in doing God’s beloved work to discover that God puts on an apron and offers us, feeds us, a feast.

Amen