

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“The Promises of Old”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 1, 2019

**Matthew 24:36-44**

*‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

In days to come  
the mountain of the Lord’s house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.  
Many peoples shall come and say,  
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.’  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
and their spears into pruning-hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer. The words from the Gospel and Prophet and the words that you laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ, your word, and let your word speak to each of us as we have need. Let it be a word of comfort, peace, hope. Let it be a word of challenge and invitation. Let it be your word that feeds us and guides us in the days ahead. I ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So earlier this week in the quiet of the turkey hangover, my wife and I sat down, both with our calendars and tried to coordinate and consider the weeks ahead. I don't know if you've done that, but there's a few extra things on our calendars other than just the normal day-to-day or evening activities. Christmas parties with friends, Christmas things with family, things that coming up here at church that are extra and amazingly special, like the choir Christmas concert and the Christmas dinner. All sorts of things are filling the time. And as we were doing that, I kept thinking about how it is for all of us to kind of get through this season. Not in a way that I typically do it. And I don't know. Maybe I'm not alone. But a lot of the times, it just feels like I want to cross things off and [inaudible] day. It's all about getting it done. It's not about living in the moment of it or appreciating it or receiving the blessing or giving a blessing as it's happening. A lot of times it's just, "Okay, let's do that. Then you go there. I'll go here. Let's

meet here. Let's do that." And that's the season of Advent. And it's the prelude to Christmas, business and chaos. And I was thinking about that as I came to the passage where we hear these familiar words about beating your swords into plowshares and spears and to pruning hooks. When I think about this passage from Isaiah, that is often the part that I latch onto. The promise of God to take the implements of war and turn them into implements of goodness, of harvesting goodness, of sharing the bounty with others. Instead of sword and spear, we now have plowshares and pruning hooks. And this is great news for all of us if it were only true in actuality in today's world. And we know that we continue to live in a world that is beset by wars and conflict that there are still swords and spears, guns, bullets, missiles that cause damage and mayhem in the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters around the globe. So hanging on to this part of the passage is important because we need to all be working towards peace and justice. But today, what I want to lift up for us are three verbs. One of which comes from the swords and plowshares passage, but the first two are things that we often overlook, which is God's desire to teach us and for us to walk in God's paths. And I particularly want to focus on walking in God's path. Because at the end of the passage, it says, "Oh house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord." And what I've been wondering about is what does that actually mean for us, to walk in the light of the Lord? It sounds nice. It sounds kind of cute. We know that there's the lighting of the candles during Advent on the Wreath, today we light the candle of hope. On Christmas eve we can light candles and sing Silent Night together. It's a great feeling, it's beautiful but what's the invitation for us? It's got to be more than just lighting a candle. There's got to be something practical that God wants from God's people. And I do this mindful of the prayer of Thomas Merton that says, I'm trying to live my life faithfully but I don't know if I am. I'm walking down this path I don't know if it's right, but I have to trust that my desire to please you, does in fact, please you. So the idea of practical advice and walking, even though we may not know where we're going, may not be certain that it's God's way, is something that I think, we're invited to pay attention to. To walk in the light of the Lord. And especially on this Sunday to walk in the light of hope, that needs to burn in our hearts and burn in the world even more.

So I was thinking about walking. And I know that I have a Fitbit and Karen has a Fitbit and many others of you have Fitbit devices that you wear on your wrist and it tells you how many steps you've taken. And I've been thinking about the power of the Fitbit, and how it informs our understanding of ourselves and our world because it counts your steps. Mine is very low tech. It just has little lights and it lights up for 2000 steps and 5000 steps, and then all the lights go across when you reach 10,000 steps, or so I've heard. And so I was wondering where does this advice come from, this great advice to walk 10,000 steps? And I found out that-- I thought it would be like the Mayo Clinic, a cardiologist who says walk 10,000 steps to take care of your heart or some massive study by the National Institute of Health which has revealed that 10,000 steps will help with cancer. And what I found, and I don't know if it's true but makes for a great sermon, is that the idea of taking 10,000 steps was actually born out of the 1964 Worlds Fair in Tokyo. A company came out with a device called a pedometer. Many of you will know that it's a Fitbit. It's a device that simply counts your steps. And just like in the Bible when it talks about 40 years or 40 days - the word 40 means fullness of time - in Japan, the number 10,000 signifies fullness. And so they came up with the idea of selling this device by encouraging people to take 10,000 steps. Now I don't know if this is true but like I said, it's a fantastic story, and it makes us think about taking those steps, which is good encouragement for many of us.

But what I've been wondering is, why do we count our steps? we live in a culture that encourages us, in ways that are often unexamined, to quantify our existence. When Jenny and I compared calendars, we did not talk about the quality of the events we would attend, what they would mean to us, who we'd be with, what blessings might emerge in our lives because we're there doing those things. Instead, we just focused on how many things are coming and the craziness that that sort of implies to two introverts just as a Fitbit encourages us to take steps: 2000, 3000, 5000, and 10,000. But it doesn't ask the question, "What did you learn while you were taking your steps?" It doesn't ask the question, "How do you want to live your life?" Or "How did you live your life while you were taking your steps?" It doesn't wonder, "Did you walk in the light of the Lord? Did you walk with the light of hope burning in your heart and in your soul? Did you walk with your best intentions and offer help or assistance to those you met?" It simply quantifies the exercise of walking. And to me, the scripture is often countercultural. It speaks a different word, a different wisdom, points us in a different direction. And to me, today's passage does that. It points us in the direction of walking, not only as a metaphor or as an actual experience, but also, as a metaphor. How are we going to live our lives in the month ahead during the season of Advent and into Christmas? And the metaphor of walking is very prominent in the old testament. You'll recall that the exodus of the people of God, from bondage to their promised land, was through a walk in the wilderness for those 40 years. They walked from one place to the next, trusting that God was with them, that God was leading them. They were faithful. They were unfaithful. God welcomed them back and in the end, got them to their destination. They walked.

Passages in Deuteronomy and Joshua-- there's the same passage that talk about walking. But first, they ask, "So now, O Israel,

what does the Lord your God require of you?" In Deuteronomy and Joshua, it says that "Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all God's ways, to love God, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all with your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his [inaudible] that I'm commanding you today for your own well-being." The verses are identical in Deuteronomy and in Joshua when the question is asked, "What does the Lord require of you?" More famously, in Micah, we have that same question, a little bit different language. "But he has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" At the beginning of the bible in Deuteronomy, at the end of it in Micah, the old testament, the invitation is for all of us, for the people of God, to walk in the way of the Lord.

So in the busyness that we all experience in the many tasks that lie before us and all of the celebrations, I want to invite you to walk slowly through the next several weeks. I want you to ask not how many things are coming up or how many steps did I take, but instead, how did God's light of hope, peace, love, and joy shine through what I've said and what I've done as I've walked through this time? And this analogy may seem hokey to you, but it came to me that in this push towards counting and quantifying, that also fuels our culturous desire to be more efficient, more effective, and to get things done more and more quickly. Instead of walking, we drive. Instead of driving, we fly, all because we need to cover more ground more quickly. And the invitation is for us to walk. Now, there are some great tradition, in our Christian, faith about pilgrimage and the power of pilgrimage. And as I was reading some accounts of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in North-West Spain, I was wondering where did this idea come from that these people from all over the world would walk to this church in North-West Spain. It began, originally, because the claim was that St. James was buried in that church. And so people would go to the church to seek the blessing of the saint to touch the relics or to pray with them. Later, it was said that a shepherd saw a bright star that stood over that church. And that legend grew, and so more people came. And then during the time of the indulgences, people got a certificate, if they made the pilgrimage, that basically said they spend less time in purgatory. So there's a little sort of soul economic trade there. But the most profound accounts of the pilgrimage are those stories of people who are walking it. And they have those unexpected encounters. They have a conversation with someone. They have an experience with a complete stranger. And out of that stranger's mouth comes God's wisdom to them, or out of their mouth comes God's wisdom to the stranger, not knowing it ahead of time, but learning about it retrospectively.

In other words, when we walk through life, we can be surprised by what God brings to us through our lives and through the lives of others. But if we move too quickly, we extinguish that light. And we lose that hope. So my invitation to you and to myself and really, to the whole world, if I had the power, would be for all of us to walk slowly through the season of advent, to be mindful of where we step, what we do, what we say, and most importantly, to be mindful of the people that are in front of us, around us, and how we can bring the light of the candle of hope into the lives of those people and our own simply by being present to them and being attentive. This, to me, is gospel. And my prayer for us all is that we spend advent walking in the light of the Lord. Amen.