

Watch Night (1Jan17)
Matt25:31-46; Eccles3:1-13

This Watch Night service is a new thing to me, and maybe to you, too. Pastor Sonja has known of them, primarily as a practice of African American congregations, and she was eager to explore it here.

The history actually began with Moravians in the Czech Republic who first held this service in 1733. A few years later it was picked up by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. His vision was to have one of these each month on the full moon.

Partly this shape was as a covenant renewal, and the "watch" of the service was about watching over relationships with God, a chance to reaffirm that commitment. The basis and title came from Mark's Gospel: "*Watch therefore: for you know not when the master of the house comes, at evening, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning. What I say unto you I say unto all, Watch!*" (13:35-37, KJV).

For Wesley's piety and reforming instinct, Watch Night also provided a religious community alternative to the drunken celebrations common in society, a way to gather in church instead of at the alehouse.

Oh, and this all comes together with another important part of this history that I hadn't mentioned yet: it's called Watch Night because it was a vigil, a watch being kept during the night. Specifically, these gatherings mostly would have meant that you would have arrived here at church last evening around 9pm and we would have kept at it until after midnight struck and the New Year began.

Now, I recognize we're already lower attendance on this Sunday morning because of celebrations last night. And if we would've tried to hold church *instead* of those celebrations, I suspect even fewer of us would've been here.

Still, it's tempting to take the Wesleyan tack and pat ourselves on the back for starting the New Year right by being here in worship and then criticize the late night revelers for neglecting what's important, being inattentive to the covenant, failing to keep watch. There's even scriptural precedent for it, like in the letter to the Romans: "*salvation is nearer to us now; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*" (13:11-14)

The counterargument is that I rather like gratifying the desires of the flesh. I cherish those celebrations with family and friends. In that light, we may well agree with the unusual Ecclesiastes perspective struggling to make sense of how we should live. It doesn't arrive at typical morality like John Wesley pursued. Along the way it barely mentions God, reiterating that we might as well eat, drink, and be merry, since there doesn't seem to be a larger purpose in life than that.

We might find a bit more answer for life's intentions than that. But first, especially as we're here on the 8th day of Christmas, we should be cautious about where we look for godliness, about excluding God from parties and merriness. Indeed, the much larger biblical precedent than abstention is about God's involvement in and love for this world and its delights. If we get too prudish and suspect we need hang out in some holy place to impress Jesus, then we've missed the notification that he didn't come to the holy people in the holy place, but was born in a barn and celebrated by raucous shepherds.

That trend continues today in our Gospel reading from Matthew, that when we look for

Jesus we don't best look at the pious following religious rules, snooty and too often hypocritical. Instead Jesus says he's identified in the hungry and thirsty, the ill and imprisoned, the homeless and the stranger. Or as Dorothy Day said in one of our lessons on Christmas Day: "it would seem raving lunacy to believe that if I offer a bed and food and hospitality to some man or woman or child, and that my guest is Christ," but nevertheless store clerks, factory and office workers, slum dwellers and suburban housewives, soldiers and tramps don't just remind us of Christ, they are Christ. (I'll post the whole reading on our Facebook page, in case you were off celebrating amid regular life and not at church last week.)

That continues to shape our caution about where and how we perceive God. Just as godliness can't *de facto* be excluded from the delights and merriment, neither do happiness and abundance indicate a sure blessing from God, since Christ promises to be present for and with the hurting and lonely and outcast and all in need.

So as we gather here at a moment of transition, of watch that looks back at our past year and forward into the new, we consider the times—as Ecclesiastes has them of opposites—a time to dance and a time to mourn, a time to plant and to harvest, for war and for peace. We might well notice that in its reluctance to speak about God, Ecclesiastes doesn't label these as times appointed by God, of God wanting times of war, weeping, hate, or death.

Yet amid these times and seasons we are left to contemplate what we may rightly name as caused by God, of what transpires in our world being labeled with the risky and uncertain term of God's will, and what more easily may be labeled as the cursed effects of our sin or neglect or disregard. In both, we're left to

consider this past year more fully, to reflect on God's presence.

To start, the moments we shared together at church fill me with plenty of gratitude, to be here with you and with Sonja, for the new beginnings and continued journey on the Road Ahead.

But it's not just here, as we've recognized. We should look back on times of celebration and the highlights of 2016, the new sights we visited and transformative experiences, the progress we made and the simple joys, the sustenance of daily bread, the possibilities of reconciliation. Those we may consider gifts of God. Maybe recall or jot three of those things now.

On the other hand, I also know there's a lot of sentiment about being ready to be done with 2016, to put that year behind us, from the small scale of facing illnesses and worries to the societal and global scales of conflict and anger and elections. Recall or jot three of those areas now. With those, in Ecclesiastes' alternating times, 2016 may be mainly a time we're ready to be done with and onto something else.

Looking ahead, then, watching out for this coming year, we also know our tasks and projects, we can predict what our work will and should be. We may see that as finding the delights, the celebrations in community, the relationships we need to revitalize us. We may take pleasure in our toil, in roles of finding Christ in our neighbors, in giving food and drink, welcoming and visiting, in responding. We may anticipate the renewed importance of care and support and advocacy in this new year. So I invite you to resolve yourself for three of those things now.

There's one more aspect of this Watch Night tradition that's not immediately satisfying or instantly gratifying. This Keeping watch is also

traditionally about waiting, about fortifying us for what is yet to come.

I mentioned that this is an especially important service in African American congregations, in spite of its European origins. The strength of that connection arose on December 31, 1862, a day known as "Freedom's Eve." On New Year's Day, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was to go into effect, and so African American slaves gathered for Watch Night worship services to pray, to hope, to wait, to celebrate as midnight came and, with it, the news of freedom.

But that wasn't the culmination. As you may know, President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation didn't effectively emancipate or free any slaves. It declared that the slaves in rebel southern states were free, but there was no way to enforce that rule, precisely since those states had withdrawn from the Union. So that New Year's Eve could have been a moment of disappointment or despair or frustration at the circumstances, but instead it was lived as a delight in the astounding good news even though that had yet to become a full reality. And still 154 years later in African American communities, they're waiting and hoping for liberation and opportunity that's still a long time coming, still not achieved, not right.

Maybe that's some of our sense, too, the proclamation of God's amazing efforts for freedom and good will, of peace on earth, of joy and celebration and merriment, of love and abundant life. Yet we wait. It is not yet fulfilled. The proclamation goes against too much of the current evidence. So the labors continue with renewed vigor, and we understand ourselves rejoined in the covenant, recommitted to the cause, abiding with hope in God.

Again, since this service was her design and excitement, final words go to Pastor Sonja, with a prayer she shared last midnight which she had

found inside one of her father's Bibles: *"Almighty God, who hast promised to restore my soul, enable me now to be quiet and to know that my life rests in Thee. Let Thy healing energy come upon me to give me power over such opposing conditions as fear and worry, to bring me great courage for daily living, beauty to refresh my spirit and a wonderful sense of fellowship with Thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*