

More than Those Who Watch for the Morning
Mark 14:26-42

“...my soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”

Psalm 130:6

The prayer that has been ours for the Sundays of Lent is now the prayer of Jesus in the garden. Out of the depths, wrought in him by becoming human, by inhabiting our human condition, by consenting to die, out of the depths he cries to the Lord. But long before he prays on this night of agony, long before the pomp and palms that will hail him as David's greater son, Mark parades our frail flesh before him in whom God's reign has come near. Returned from the waters of baptism and the temptations of the wilderness, he hears the cries of a man possessed and frees him; cures the fever of a disciple's mother-in-law who serves him; he is the destination of the diseased and the dispossessed, redeeming them to health and wholeness. He cleanses the leper with a word, forgives the paralytic his sins and commands him to rise; breaks bread with tax collectors and sinners, their souls in need of a physician; restores a man's withered hand on the Sabbath; sends another man's demons named Legion into a herd of swine; "Talitha cum" he says to a dead child and she lives; a woman touches the hem of his garment, her hemorrhage immediately stopped; with five loaves and two fish, he feeds the hungry multitude; the sick are brought to him on mats, from villages or cities or farms, and laid at his feet in the marketplace; a Syrophenician woman begs him like a dog to restore her child to health and he does; he opens the ears and unstops the mouth of a deaf and dumb man; casts epilepsy out of a little boy; makes blind Bartimaeus to see.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Surely he has taken them as his own, assumed them so that he can redeem them, so that there can be no place we are that God is not. Out of the depths of human infirmity and weakness, in the first place, out of the depths of all

“the troubles he’s seen”, out of the depths of lives lived on the edge of death, he cries to the Lord: “Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” I sometimes think he asks that the hour pass from him, that the cup be removed because he cannot bear to leave us in such a mess, leave us in so many pieces without him.

I imagine this because, in theory, I want him to be tangibly present among us now. I want him by my side in the hospital room or at the edge of an open grave. Granted in every healing touch recorded in Mark, in each miraculous cure, we glimpse God’s kingdom come near for a moment in time; glimpse God’s final purposes in the confines of a single ancient life. But in the meantime, we are left to wait like watchmen for the morning. And as we wait, we wonder. Why did he have to be mortal, did he have to die? Why could he not be the eternal God returned, the same God who once walked in the garden in the cool of the day? God knows we have had enough of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. We have had our fill of the knowledge of good and evil. Let this hour pass, this cup be removed so that he can walk in our city streets again, so that we may bring him our deaf and blind, our crippled and dying children, our hungry and homeless, our diseased and desperate friends, bring him ourselves and our sin-sick souls. Let him assume all of our infirmities and weaknesses save one, the final one.

But with the crowd about to turn on him, with the betrayer at hand, Jesus cries, in the second place, from out of the depths of human sin and death-dealing. It is these darker depths, this utter alienation from God that Jesus assumes for our sakes in Gethsemane. “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” He bears the consequences of our opposition to God, an opposition foreshadowed in the questions sprinkled throughout Mark’s Gospel. They are questions that seek to establish in our minds the proper distinction between good and evil we once swallowed in the garden of our fall. They are questions used to keep our distance from the

God who has come too near, the God who, in Jesus Christ, will defeat, once for all, everything that threatens to separate us from his love. Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? Why do his disciples not fast? Why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath? Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him? How can you say, "Who touched me?" Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands? Is this not the carpenter? Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands? Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? What must I do to inherit eternal life? At best, we turn away from him sorrowful; at worst, indifferent; at most, an enemy.

To all our questions, he has only one for us: Who do you say that I am? On this day of high celebration, standing among the crowds that have come from out of the depths of helplessness and hopelessness to be healed by him, we shout: Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna! Save us! From out of these depths, save us!

But before the week is out, we will stand in a second crowd and cry out of depths far deeper and darker than we care to admit. These are the depths of opposition and separation that bully or shun, the depths that condemn or condescend, the depths that lynch or crucify or massacre or murder. From out of the self-justifying depths, the self-righteous depths, the self-important depths, the depths that cannot abide the way of God's love. Who will we say that he is? We will say he was despised and rejected; stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, we will call him a blasphemer, an enemy of God, a scapegoat. And when morning dawns, we will have no conscience switching sides, dropping our palms and raising our voices to cry, "Crucify." Therefore from out of the deeper depths of human sin and death-dealing, he cries to the Lord in

the garden for our sorry sakes, “If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?”

Finally, after Jesus prayer in the garden has been met by the deafening silence of God, a silence we know all too well, out of the depths he cries in the third place as mortals cry who know they must die. See how completely he inhabits our frail flesh. “I am deeply grieved,” he had said to the disciples who accompanied their distressed and agitated teacher on this fateful night. Not sad, not afraid, not angry but grieved. So completely with us in life, now he has assumed without exception the condition of the only animal able to anticipate the hour of its death. “Remain here and keep awake,” he says to Peter, James and John, not for his sake, but even here to give us the help we need most: help not in our living, but in our dying. At the last, of course, we cannot even watch one hour—just as still we cannot. “If there is anything which brings out clearly...the content of the Gospel...[that God is ‘for us’],” says Karl Barth, “it is this aspect of the event in Gethsemane, in which the act of God in Jesus Christ had absolutely nothing to correspond to it in the existence of those who believe in Him. They could not watch with Him even one hour. He alone watched and prayed in their place,” more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

For our part, then, given the busy week ahead and a sermon almost long enough to complete our list of things we have to do, we will go about our business: wake and eat and work and play and sleep like creatures oblivious to the love unwanted and unknown who once walked upon the earth, oblivious even now to his hand upon our broken lives, his spit mingled with the tears in our blind eyes, his fingers unstopping our ears that refuse to listen for his word, his eye tenderly watching our every move as we walk inexorably toward the grave. Wait with him one hour this week, at the table, in the garden, even on Golgotha. Wait with him one hour who waits for you, who is still waiting for you to turn to him, more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.