Watch Therefore…

“Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched 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 hour you do not expect.”

Matt. 24:42-44

I never really understood the southern expression ‘a hot mess’ until we got our new dog Maisie. She is fits that description perfectly… as do many puppies I suppose. So, we have Maisie enrolled in puppy training right now - a 6-week program. She’s been learning how to ‘sit’ and stay, how walk on a leash without us feeling like we are waterskiing behind a boat, and to obey the command to ‘leave it’ when she sees something on the ground she wants to take in her mouth. There’s a test at the end of the course, she Sue and I are cramming for the finals.

The way you train a puppy is by using ‘positive reinforcement’, which is just a fancy way of saying ‘treats’. Whenever your puppy does something you want, you give them a treat. And Maisie responds very well to treats... she’d solve calculus problems for treats! So, we’re actually making some progress but it’s costing a lot in treats. We may be on food stamps if this course doesn’t end soon!

The first lesson you want them to learn is to be watchful… to keep their attention on you. And the way you do that is whenever you catch them looking at you, being watchful, you praise them and give them a treat. They might be on the other side of the room but if you catch them looking at you, give them a treat and say ‘good dog’. Well, it doesn’t take long till your dog is looking at you all the time. And that’s the most important thing for them to learn because if they aren’t watchful, you can’t teach them anything else.

It’s important for puppies. It’s important for us all. Last month I wasn’t watching carefully and almost had a car accident. I was waiting for a break in the oncoming traffic so I could turn left. There was a car coming my way, I thought he was turning right so I pulled out into the intersection but he didn’t turn! Suddenly I had this car coming right at me. Sue was sitting in the passenger seat and it kind of freaked her out… I know this because she didn’t say a word! Fortunately, the driver in that car was watchful and managed to stop his car and weave around me.

Watchfulness is very important in fighting crime. Many neighborhoods have implemented a program called Neighborhood Watch. Neighborhood watch trains neighbors to be on the lookout for suspicious activity in their neighborhood and then to contact law enforcement if your suspicions are aroused. It works! First started in 1972, Neighborhood Watch programs have proven to be the best defense against crime.

So, watchfulness is important… it’s important for our physical wellbeing, and as it turns out, it’s important for spiritual wellbeing too. In fact, Jesus commands this to be the posture of the faithful. On this first Sunday of Advent as we embark on a new church year, the imperative of Jesus is to be watchful. Keep your eyes peeled for sign of his coming because nobody knows the day or the hour when he will return. You see, Advent is not simply about marking the arrival of Christ 2000 years ago in Bethlehem. It’s also about preparing for Christ’s imminent return to usher in the kingdom of God… to bring light where darkness reins, love where hatred rules, peace where wars rage, justice where inequality is tolerated. Christ promises to come back but, in the meantime, he wants us to be actively living out the faith.

So, to be watchful, according to Matthew’s congregation was more than just a posture of attentiveness, it was to actively engaged in living out the faith. I saw a bumper sticker once that summed it up this way: ‘**Christ is coming back… look busy!’**  It’s a warning against complacency… don’t fall into the trap of believing that nothing really matters. Oh, sure there’s injustice in the world, of course black lives do matter, but what can I do about it? I’m just one person! Yes, global warming is real and yes, our oceans are choking on tons of plastic pollution each year, but what can we really do to make a different on such large issues? We live in a throw-away society! That’s just the way it is.

Matthew’s congregation was feeling overwhelmed too – living in the shadow of the Roman Empire that in 70 AD destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and dispersed the Jews. And Christians are beginning to experience some persecution too and some are beginning to question whether Jesus is coming back at all. It’s easy to fall into complacency, cynicism and despair during trying times. But the warning in Matthew’s gospel is this: “Don’t let your guard down just when it counts most of all! Christ is coming when you least expect him and he’ll either find us forsaking the faith or living the faith? So be watchful because he will come like a thief in the night.

All of us know that on Sept 11th, 2001 a group of terrorists leveled the Trade Towers in NYC. On that fateful day all air traffic in the USA was grounded immediately. No planes were allowed to fly in US airspace. Problem is, many planes were en route to the USA from Europe and couldn’t turn back… not enough fuel. So, most of them were re-routed to a small airport in Gander Nfld. They were instructed to land there and nobody was allowed to disembark until officials gave them clearance to do so. In the end 38 planes landed there and after a night stuck on board they disembarked, went thru security and were handed over to Red Cross officials for their care. The Red Cross had mobilized an army of volunteers from Gander and surrounding area to help them look after these 6,600 people. Schools, churches and community centers were all transformed into hostels for them. Cots, bedding and pillows were provided and teams of volunteers were organized to cook and feed the people each day. Computers and telephones were made available to the people so they could contact family back home and keep in touch daily. As the days wore on, they even organized entertainment for them – music and games.

Other cities in Canada also cared for plane-loads of people – larger cities like Vancouver and Halifax… but none did it as well as this tiny community of Gander Newfoundland. Their hospitality was unsurpassed and their ministry was a true blessing in a time of deep crisis. Gander proved to be a bright light in a time of deep darkness. And it was so significant that a book was written about it, a documentary done, and on the 10th anniversary a reunion was organized and the passengers came back to Gander because they had forged such lasting friendships with these people.

You see, the people of Gander have the right posture… they were watchful and when the unexpected happened, they were quick to spring into action to serve those in need. That’s what Christ is talking about! Be watchful, expect the unexpected, and when the unexpected happens, seize the opportunity it affords you to serve in the name of Christ. This much is certain. Christ is coming… so look busy! Amen