

**December 1, 2002**

**“WATCHFUL WAITING...”**

**“Watch and pray....” Mark 14:38 Hebrews 12:1,2**

A dear friend of mine, of many many years, called me from his home in New Jersey a couple of months ago to tell me that he had been diagnosed with prostatic cancer, a not uncommon occurrence among family and friends as I grow older in these more recent years. He has long been careful about his health, and confident about his person, so it came as a shock to him, and of course to me. His doctors assured him that it is controllable, but no one likes to hear that he (or she) has cancer. Great strides have been made in recent decades in the treatment and cure of the disease, but most of us remember the time when having cancer was a dreaded and difficult piece of news.

In his case the specialists agreed that surgery was not called for, neither were x-ray or chemo therapy treatments. I asked what they were going to do. He said “They aren’t going to do anything.” They recommended a wait and see program, which in the trade is called “Watchful Waiting.” With certain kinds of cancer, considering the age of the patient, sometimes no active and aggressive treatment is proposed until there is time to see what the body will do on its own to contain the cancer. A six months waiting period was advised in this case, following which additional tests would be conducted to see how things stood, with every expectation that good news would be forth coming.

I was pleased that he called me. I thanked him and assured him of my repeated prayers, but after we hung up I began to think about that strategy: watchful waiting. It sounds so passive, but I came to realize it might be a sound and powerful tool for all of us, in a variety of situations.

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The point surely applies to the present situation when there is nothing recommended to treat an illness or disease, except to watch and wait and see what will happen. My contention here today however, is that the advice also applies to a myriad of other areas of the life we live from day to day. Let me offer you some examples, while you think of your own.

Sometimes we need to do no more than watchful waiting when it comes to a concern for someone you love: a husband, wife, child, a parent, friend, or companion. Sometimes you have to wait for a child to get hold of himself. You cannot abandon a child who is confused and needs new direction. You can seek help; you can encourage; you can surely pray... but there is nothing you can do, unless and until the one you worry about takes the necessary steps to get his/her problem under

control. God can intercede in the soul and psyche of another person, but we cannot. We need to drop back and do some watchful waiting. We are all too committed to changing the other person: giving advice and criticizing, trying to direct another to do it as we would....when silence and withdrawal might help the person to help himself or herself far more. The advice might be well intentioned maybe, but it is also unwelcomed. You can try to help too much and deny another person the privilege of gaining strength through overcoming adversity.

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In his famous chapter describing love and its power to change, St. Paul writes that “Love is patient and kind.” (I Corinthians 13) What beautiful words. Patience and kindness. I don’t need to tell you how unkind the world can be. Just pick up a newspaper, or tune in the evening news broadcast on TV or radio. Webster defines “kind,” as “sympathetic, friendly, gentle, tender-hearted, generous, cordial.” There are times when the world is not a friendly place. There are some kind and sympathetic people in it, thank God; but whether you are trying to get around Publix Super Market on Thanksgiving Wednesday afternoon, or driving down or up Highway 95, or just trying to get a parking place in a crowded church parking lot, or later when you find your favorite pew is filled by visitors. It reminds me of a bulletin notice in a church up north: “Our Christians in this congregation are the kindest, most friendly and courteous people in all of Christ’s kingdom....unless you try to sit in their pew!” Love, Paul said, is kind.

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It is also patient. I don’t need to tell you how impatient the world can be either. All you have to do is to drive to Boca Raton on Route One, or drive back home this time of year on A1A. It is bad enough with the traffic around you; but the father and husband of the family, in the right front seat, is known for his impatience. He is/was far more trouble than the surrounding traffic. He was pining loudly the other night for the months of old, when the South Florida roads were virtually empty. He pointed out the failure and foibles of each and every errant driver and exclaimed how these tourists cannot drive. We got home safely, thanks to the mother driver in the left seat, but patience was wanting. Oh dear. (We were all suffering from a little bit too much togetherness.) Patience might well be a virtue – but so few people have it, it is a wonder anyone remembers at all.

The Bible says “love is patient.” Hummmm... real love is. Patient enough to wait for a friend to catch up with you. Patient enough for a spouse to gather what you are saying or thinking or assuming. Patient enough to suffer while the other goes through the times of trial. You should not dismiss a friendship or relationship or a marriage because of one lousy argument or betrayal.

**Watchful waiting on a friend or loved one who is acting out of character is another word or phrase for patient love. Psalm 40 adds: “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry...He put a new song in my mouth.” It is alright to sing the old song until you get the new one, but when the new one comes, sing it out; you will enjoy it all the more. Isaiah 40:31 says, “They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.”**

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**Watchful waiting is also a good attitude and approach when it comes to making important decisions in seeking the Will of God for your life. I often recommend that people adopt a watchful waiting attitude. Gather all the facts and information you can reasonably find, but then drop back and wait. It is amazing what God can do if you get yourself out of the way and allow him to enter in.**

**It says in Isaiah 55:8-9, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”**

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**Then, especially at this time of year, apply this watchful waiting theme to Advent, the beginning of the Christian year. The word advent means the beginning, like we are experiencing the advent of the winter season here in Palm Beach. It is also called the season of expectancy, as we prepare ourselves with great expectations for the coming of the Messiah on Christmas. And as we prepare so ardently for the Christmas holiday in all worldly ways, I offer you the thought today that our spiritual and religious preparations ought at least to equal the fervor of shopping, partying, decorating and feasting.**

**The season of Advent is comprised of the four Sundays prior to Christmas Eve. All the way back in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., Gregory the Great declared that the celebration of the Holy Season had become too secular. He said that too little emphasis was being placed on Jesus Christ, whose birthday it is. Christmas, he said had become a time of frivolity and the Birth of the Messiah had been trivialized by commercial interests. (I can hardly imagine what sort of commercial interests could have surrounded the Christmas holiday back in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, but Pope Gregory was worried.) He said that Christians should set aside a time to prepare for the Coming of Christ, much as you and I would if we were expecting a new child in your home. In the final month, as it were, you would have to do all kinds of extraordinary things, as many of you have. We should do the same with the same intense interest, preparing to celebrate the arrival of Christ. Peggy and I have daughters who were born on December 15<sup>th</sup> and December 24<sup>th</sup>, so we have experienced first hand what I am saying.**

I encourage you to celebrate Advent in your homes, a many families do, in the lighting of the candles, or in the use of Advent calendars, a little symbol for the days before Christmas. Then you will have a constant reminder that Christ is coming. He is coming indeed. He will come to Bethlehem. And he will bring the light which all the darkness in the world will never be able to extinguish. We must learn watchful waiting until he comes.

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As you know, here in Palm Beach, and with your neighbors, in the press and on T.V., this Advent season also coincides with the Jewish Hanukkah celebration which also features the symbol of light. Each night for eight nights a candle on the Hanukkah Menorah is lighted to symbolize the miracle God gave to his chosen people at the time of rededication of the temple in Jerusalem. It celebrates the miracle of the oil which would not run out.

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In the Prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 11:1-9, it is promised that a shoot, a little branch, a sprig, will grow out of the stump of Jesse. It is important that we know a couple of things about this passage. First, Jesse was the father of King David. Isaiah seems to be talking about the Royal Line of Jesse (David). This is the first time historically that David's family name has been mentioned in the prophecy. Of course, we know Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. David was also born in Bethlehem.

Secondly, "Out of the stump..." We need to remember that the people of Israel had been cut down. The "oak tree of Judah" was gone, only a stump remained. But out of that stump, Isaiah prophesied, a new shoot would come forth. God's purposes will prevail.

At the end of chapter 10, Isaiah says that God will lop off the boughs of the great cedar trees, (of Assyria). He will hew them down, like a giant lumberjack, to the ground. Now those who study the forest will tell you (Isaiah knew it) that when a cedar tree falls in Lebanon, the stump simply rots and dwindles away. But, when an oak tree is felled, it is so designed by God and nature, that out of what remains little shoots will grow, "suckers" we used to call them. Those shoots will in turn become branches if God nurtures them. The branch in turn will become a tree. Isaiah is drawing the contrast between the cedars of the Assyrians and the oak trees of Judah. When evil falls, it is over and done for, like the cedar. But when God's people fall (Are you listening?), they will in the Power of the Holy Spirit live to rise again, like the oak.

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Next I want to say something to you personally. As I look out over this congregation, and think of others not able to be here, I know that many of you are experiencing (or have experienced) great difficulties in matters of health, business, family, concern for the ones you love, grief, or other awful news. God's people sometimes are cut to the ground. They have to live, as Isaiah says in chapter nine, "in darkness." There is not a soul within the sound of my voice who has not experienced days when it has been/is dark, when you don't know where to turn, or how to find the courage to go on. I say as a pastor and a friend to you: be assured that what is true in the promise of the prophecy is also true personally with you and me. Believe that the oak tree of God will bring forth a shoot. The day will come, when a little glimmer of light will shine out. And out of the worst broken stump, whatever has happened in your life, or your family, or your home, or your work, God will raise up something new for you.

"In God's time it will all be made clear." His light will shine when He decides to turn it on. Meanwhile, we will have to learn to live with the darkness, in the Time and providence of God. It took God a long time to make this prophecy come true. It took 800 years for The Messiah to come.

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Watchful waiting is also a good attitude to lead with when you change or are forced to change where you live or work or retire. Each new time of life calls for a new venue, you must not carry the old commanding attitude into a new position. Learn to wait a while for the newness to take hold of you.

In the words of our text from Matthew 26:41, Jesus is speaking to Simon Peter, who with James and John had accompanied The Lord to his favorite place of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. On the night before his death (remember) he asked them to sit and wait, to keep watch, as he went off to pray to his heavenly father. It says he was troubled. "My father," he prayed, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done." Not my will but thine be done.

When he returned, the three disciples he had chosen to keep watch with him, were asleep. He said to them, or rather individually to Peter, "Could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

"Watch and pray." Sometimes you need to go into a watchful waiting stage, a time when there is nothing active which you can or should do to change the situation. It is similar to the serenity prayer which so many of you already know. "Help me to accept the things I cannot change, to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

The additional power available to us as God's children is to add prayer to the watchful waiting. Watch, keep an eye on where you are; wait patiently as it all unfolds; but lift your heart and soul and hopes and prayers to the God who rules on high.

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A friend sent me this lovely piece on the internet, the other day called "Too Nice Not To Share": It tells of a woman 92 years old, petite, well poised, and proud. She is fully dressed each morning by eight o'clock, with her hair fashionably done and her makeup perfectly applied. This day however is different. She has moved to a nursing home. Her husband of 70 years recently passed away, making this move necessary.

After many hours of waiting in the lobby of the nursing home, she smiled sweetly when I told her that her room was ready. As she maneuvered her walker to the elevator, I provided a visual description of her tiny room, including the eyelet curtains that had been hung on her window. "I love it!", she stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy.

"Mrs. Jones, you haven't seen the room...just wait," I said.

Then she spoke these words that I will never forget: "That does not have anything to do with it," she gently replied. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not, does not depend on how the furniture is arranged. It is how I arrange my mind. I have already decided to love it." (Like I always say, "you carry your happiness with you or you will never find it where you go.")

"It is a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice. I can spend the day in "bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work, or I can get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do work. Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes open, I will focus on the new day and all of the happy memories I have stored away...just for this time in my life. Old age is like a bank account. You withdraw from what you have already put in."

"I believe – that our background and circumstances may have influenced who we are, but we are responsible for who we become."

"I believe – that just because someone doesn't love you the way you want them to doesn't mean they don't love you with all they have."

"I believe – that it's taking me a long time to become the person I want to be."

"I believe – that you should always leave loved ones with loving words. It may be the last time you see them."

**“I believe – that you can keep going, long after you can’t. I believe – that we are responsible for what we do, no matter how we feel. I believe – that either you control your attitude or it controls you. I believe – that no matter how bad your heart is broken the world doesn’t stop for your grief.”**

**“I believe – that just because two people argue, it doesn’t mean they don’t love each other. And just because they don’t argue, it doesn’t mean they do! I believe – that two people can look at the exact same thing and see something totally different.”**

**“I believe – that the people you care about most in life are taken from you too soon.” But God still loves you, even after they are gone, for now and forever more, amen.**

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**Palm Beach, Florida**