



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

November 29, 2020

# Careful What You Wish For

Ed Sutter

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 7, 2020

There's a story, I have no idea if it's based in fact or fiction, of a rabbi many years ago who would walk around his town and neighboring countryside as he would pray each day. One day, lost in prayer while he wandered, he suddenly stumbled onto a foreign property and a guard's voice shouted out, "Stop right there!" As the rabbi looked up, the guard asked, "Who are you and what are you doing here?" In response the rabbi smiled and asked, "how much do they pay you to guard this property?" After hearing the response, the rabbi immediately offers, "I'll pay you twice as much to stand in front of my home and ask me the same question every day. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

As the rabbi's response would indicate, these are enormously valuable questions. Value, however, doesn't mean that they are easily answered. Time and time again I sit with people who struggle to answer either or both of these questions. I don't know who I am, and I don't know what I'm doing here. They're questions of identity and purpose – and if you've ever heard me speak, you know that, in my mind, these are primary issues of both life and faith.

When we move through the world without a sense of who we are, a sense of God has made us to be and is calling us to be, we move without purpose. We wander, and often, like the rabbi, we stumble into unfamiliar and sometimes threatening or dangerous territory. Places that we don't recognize and places that we're not prepared to be.

I think that this happens in our faith pretty regularly. We feel unsure of our direction, our calling, and so we wander, or we follow after the crowd in front of us. We pray the prayers, we light the candles, we read the books, but we're still left feeling like we're wandering. We hear about heaven, or a relationship with Jesus, and we think, "I want that, but I don't

know how to get it.” So we merge into the faithful traffic around us in the hopes that we’ll be caught up in the flow to some sort of revelation. Sometimes it works like that, but there’s a danger in it, too. We need to be asked the rabbi’s question, “who am I and what am I doing here?”

This season of advent is the perfect time to begin asking this question of ourselves. A season of remembering that Jesus has come, and a season of waiting for Jesus to come again. As we wait for Jesus to enter the world, we need to ask ourselves, “Am I *really* ready for Jesus to enter the world?” Who am I and what am I doing here? Do I really know what I’m asking for?

We’ve all heard from our early science classes that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. There’s some truth in this in our faith lives as well. When Jesus enters our world, when Jesus enters your life, there are actions and reactions that begin to move and take place. We cannot live a life that both follows after Jesus, and stays the same as it ever was. Faith requires change. You can’t knock over the first domino in the pile and expect the rest to stay as they were. When Jesus shows up, things start to change. Are you ready for that?

The passage from Isaiah follows this exact rhythm. It begins with Isaiah pleading, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” and it ends with the recognition of sin, “do not be angry beyond measure, Lord.” There’s an old blues song that sums this up, saying, “Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die” Don’t you feel like that’s true? That sometimes we plead for God to tear open the heavens and come down...until we realize what that means for our lives and the world around us?

What if I were to plead for Jesus to come into my life, and then he actually did? What would I need to change? We are a culture that is absolutely defined by the fact that we want the results without the work that it takes to get there. We want the finish line but not the race, the mountaintop but not the climb, the product but not the practice. “No need to change your diet,” “only 15 minutes a day,” “5 easy steps,” “a simple payment plan.” We are flooded with the notion that results ought to be easy. That we *deserve* it.

What if Jesus were to show up and ask, “Who are you and what are you doing here?” How do you answer that question when you’re face to face with Jesus? “Well, Jesus. I’m hoping for a comfortable life, and I’m trying to be a good person.” Sounds a little flat when we imagine looking into Jesus’ eyes, doesn’t it?

We need to keep in mind what we’re asking for, what we’re waiting for when we say that we’re expectant of Jesus’ arrival. Just a few verses earlier in the chapter that we read from in Mark, Jesus compares the time of his coming to the pains of childbirth. Now you can clearly imagine that I’ve not experienced these pains, but I have, on three occasions held my wife’s hand as she has ushered our children into the world, and I can tell you that we love to hold the newborn child, but it is not a comfortable journey on the way.

There is no epidural of faith that can numb us to difficulty of change. There is no TED talk that can serve as a 15-minute primer on following after Christ. And as often as people have tried to write them, there’s no such thing as 5 easy steps to a closer relationship with the Lord.

Jesus tells us – “keep watch, stay awake, be alert – no one knows when this time is coming.”

I suppose this is why we use the term, “to wait expectantly.” And let that be my encouragement to you this morning. Don’t just wait. Don’t become bored. Don’t fall into the traps of laziness, of comparison to your neighbor, of idleness or idolatry. But wait expectantly.

Every day as you come and go from your homes, ask yourself, “Who am I and what am I doing here?” And remember that just as a parent waits to hold her child, we wait for our savior to hold us.

Amen.



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