

WATCHING

Mark 13:32-37

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 18, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ [a] and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; [a] for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

I.

Over the past several months, through conversations with some of you, through my teaching and personal reading, and through my never-ending but attempt to keep up with affairs of the world, I have been reminded – once again – of how little we know.

I come to worship [someone says] for the hour of peace it provides, when I can get off my phone and away from my screens and focus on what is really important. It is an hour that leads me to grateful, to remind me how fortunate I am, we are, compared to so many people in the world. I know there is something more behind the words and music of worship, but I am not sure I know what it is.

I grew up with a religion of “hellfire and damnation” [another says]. When I left home at eighteen I left that religion behind. I’ve travelled the world. I’ve seen war and peace, cruelty and beauty. I think there is something more than this life, but I am not sure I know what it is.

How little we know.

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In the Old Testament class I am currently teaching, I look at the lesson plans I have drawn up based on the research and writing of reputable scholars – Jewish, Christian, secular – who mine fields of ancient history, archaeology, and comparative religion more thoroughly than the surface walk of my own study.

In class we ready of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Joshua, Saul, David, and all the kings who follow. At many turns we cannot help find discrepancies.

- Did the people of Israel take the land in the dramatic battle of Jericho narrated in the Book of Joshua, in which the people marched around the city seven times, the priests blew the trumpets, the people shouted, and the walls came tumbling down?¹ Or did the people of Israel come into the land as a more natural migration, over time, with fits and starts as the first chapters of the Book of Judges narrates?²
- Did Saul command an army of 370,000, as one verse³ asserts; or 210,000, as another⁴ asserts?

With so little independent archaeological and historical record of many of the people and events narrated in the Bible, I cannot help but wonder, every time I teach this material, have these Biblical characters grown in our imagination and faith beyond their original historical significance? Do we base our faith on people and events that hardly anyone else at the time noticed or knew?

Or, I come to think, is it possible that the very *insignificance* of the people and events *at the time* serves to prepare the way for the faith we have in a Savior who was born to an *obscure* couple in a *borrowed* manager outside a *small* but full inn in an *out of the way* village named Bethlehem,⁵ a Savior who

Though he was in the *form* of God,
Did not regard *equality* with God
As something to be exploited,
But *emptied himself*,
Taking the form of a *slave*,
Being born in *human likeness*,
...being found in *human form*,
Humbled himself,
...became obedient to the point of *death*—
*Even death on a cross.*⁶

Is it part of the irony of God that something so historically and religiously *significant* as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would come from a *small* desert region of the world and from a people whose origins *barely registered* in the annals of historians of their day?

How little we know.

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The two most recent books I have completed also give voice to this paucity of our knowledge.

Alan Lightman's *Searching for Stars on an Island in Maine* is a meditation of how he – as a theoretical physicist – cannot quite get himself to believe in the God of his Jewish upbringing but at the same time cannot simply rest with the proposition that all life is nothing more than the material. Lightman writes:

¹ Joshua 6, especially verses 15-21.

² Judges 1 and 2.

³ I Samuel 11:8.

⁴ I Samuel 15:4.

⁵ Luke 2:1-7/

⁶ Philippians 2:6-8/

It is almost as if Nature in her glory wants us to believe in a heaven, something divine and immaterial *beyond nature* itself.⁷

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The second book, which I completed more quickly than I expected given its 900+ pages, is Jill Lepore's *These Truths: A History of the United States*.

Lepore recounts an incident at the Constitutional Convention, in 1787, when, four months after an arduous process of drafting, the document was read aloud to the delegates for the *first* time. Benjamin Franklin, crippled by gout, asked that his speech in response to the oral reading be read aloud by another, for he himself was too weak to speak.

Mr. President, [he began], I confess that there are several parts of this constitution which I do *not* at present approve, but I am *not* sure I shall *never* approve them.

For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by *better information*, or *fuller consideration*, to *change opinions* even on *important* subjects...

...the older I grow [Franklin said], the more apt I am to *doubt* my *own* judgment, and to pay *more* respect to the judgment of *others*....

Thus, I consent, Sir, to this Constitution...because I expect no better, and because I am *not sure*, that it is not the best.⁸

Lightman the physicist and Franklin the founder – both were aware – humbly – of how little they knew.

II.

Concerning the Thirteenth Chapter of Mark, portions of which we read earlier, we see one of the greatest gaps between what the disciples of Jesus *thought* they knew versus what they *did* know.

In their day, and for several centuries, the Jewish people had been expecting the “Day of the Lord,” that day when God would come, possibly through a Messianic figure like Jesus, and make things right: free them from Roman bondage; restore them to rule as they at known at times in the past; separate the righteous from the unrighteous, the sheep from the goats, the clean from the unclean. When some saw John the Baptist and heard him point to Jesus, they thought the day was near; and when they heard Jesus, they thought the day would come soon, and very soon.

But Jesus dispels their certainty concerning what the Day of the Lord might entail, and the imminence of its timetable: timetable.

...about that day or hour no one knows [Jesus says], [not even] the angels in heaven, nor [me] the Son, but *only* the Father.

Jesus adds to the list of what they “don’t know” the thing they most want to know: how soon it will be before God will come and make things right.

⁷ Alan Lightman, *Searching for Stars on an Island in Maine* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018), 20-21.

⁸ Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 127.

But instead of giving them a clock or a calendar, Jesus issues them a summons:

Beware, keep alert;
for you do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man going on a journey,
when he leaves home and puts [others] in charge,
each with his work,
and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake—
for you do not know when the master of the house will come,
in the evening,
or at midnight,
or at cockcrow,
or at dawn,
or else he may find you asleep
when he comes suddenly.

And what I say to you [my disciples] I say to all:
Keep awake.

Jesus does not provide them with any more knowledge of when God will come and make things right than they already have. He refuses to alleviate how little they know. But he provides a new stance toward that mystery which is to come: Watching. Vigilant watching. Watching like a doorkeeper awaiting the return of the owner of the manor.

“Keep awake,” Jesus says. “Watch.” “Be on the lookout for what is to come.”

III.

So back to my reading.

Even though Lightman himself cannot quite come to believe in God, he quotes the last line of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*:

...from so simple a beginning
endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful
have been,
and are being,
evolved.⁹

The beauty and wonder of nature lead Lightman *never* to shut the door on faith, but to keep watching, “searching for a star on an island in Maine, watching in *hope* that faith may indeed come.

Though we *know* no more than Lightman knows, our watching has led many of us to walk through that door, and to find, on the other side, a faith in which we can have and watch not only with hope, but also with confidence, a confidence we call assurance, and assurance we call “blessed.”

⁹ Lightman, 21, quoting Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (1859), in *Great Books of the Western World*, Volume 49, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), page 243.

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And Lepore ends her voluminous history of our nation with the image of contemporary America being a ship in need of repair.

It falls to a new generation of Americans [she writes¹⁰], reckoning what our forebears had wrought, to fathom the depths of the doom-black sea.

If we mean to repair the tattered ship, we will need to fell the most majestic pine in a deer-hunted forest and raise a new *mast* that can pierce the clouded sky.

With sharpened [axes], we will have to hew timbers of cedar and oak into planks, straight and true.

We will need to drive home nails with the untiring swing of mighty arms and, with needles held tenderly in nimble fingers, stitch new *sails* out of the rugged canvas of our goodwill.

Knowing that heat and sparks and hammers and anvils are not enough – [i.e. knowing that technology alone cannot save us at sea] – we will have to forge an anchor in the glowing fire of our *ideals*.

And to steer our ship through wind and wave, we will need to learn an ancient and nearly forgotten art: how to *navigate by the stars*.¹¹

Faith is one such “ancient and nearly forgotten art.” Faith is looking heavenward, watching the stars, then casting our eyes toward earth and sea, navigating by what we have seen.

Watching upward. Navigating forward, based on what we have seen. That is faith.

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¹⁰ Her final paragraph is written, as it should be, in the past tense, as she is a historian, hoping these words will be read and studied decades from now. Since they serve as a charge to us who are the present generation of American’s I have re-worded them into present tense.

¹¹ Lepore 788-789.