

## **Sermon, November 27, 2022: Watching: The Day is Almost Here**

As I sat with today's advent scriptures, there were three words that stood out for me, watching, waiting and surprise. I wondered, what are you and I watching for and waiting for this advent? What surprises do we anticipate?

Might we be watching and waiting for good deals on the Christmas gifts, we want to purchase? Or might we be anticipating surprising someone with a special gift or being surprised by someone with a gift we have been wishing for.

Or are we watching and waiting for the coming of the one foretold in Isaiah 2. A Messiah who would restore God's world to how he created it to be, by teaching the people God's ways, resulting in surprises like weapons of war and destruction being turned into food producing tools!

In Experiencing the Story, we heard from an old shepherd's perspective of how a lot of people, at the time Jesus was born, were watching and waiting for the Messiah to come and fix the world. Other people had given up hope because they had been watching and waiting for so long and Jesus had not come as soon as they expected.

In the Matthew 24 scripture we heard read this morning, Jesus is a grown man. He has been talking to his disciples about his coming death, resurrection, and final return, the second coming or Advent 2.

Jesus tells them not try to figure out the time of his final return because it would be a surprise to everyone, even him. He drew multiple word pictures of people being surprised and said his followers were to always be ready by watching for his coming.

It seems to me that Jesus was inviting them, and us, to live each day as if Jesus might appear at any moment and surprise us. And in the meantime? We are to live the way Jesus taught us to live.

As I was thinking about watching and waiting and surprises, I thought of a story by Leo Tolstoy and decided to share a version of it with you today.

One evening during Advent, Old Papa Panov, the village shoemaker, stepped outside his shop to take one last look around. The sounds of happiness, the bright lights and faint but delicious smells of Christmas baking reminded him of past Christmas times when his wife had been alive and his own children little. Now they had gone.

His usually cheerful face, with the little laughter wrinkles behind the round steel spectacles, looked sad now. But he went back indoors with a firm step, put up the shutters, and set a pot of coffee to heat on the charcoal stove. Then, with a sigh, he settled in his big armchair.

Papa Panov picked up his big, old family Bible and read again the Christmas story. He read how Mary and Joseph, tired by their journey to Bethlehem, found no room at the inn, and that Mary's little baby was actually born in a stable. "Oh dear!" exclaimed Papa Panov, "if only they had come to my house! I would have given them my bed and I could have covered the baby with my patchwork quilt to keep him warm."

Papa Panov read on about the wise men who had come to see Jesus, bringing him splendid gifts. Papa Panov's face fell. 'I have no gift that I could give him' he thought sadly. Then his face brightened. He put down the Bible, got up and found on a top shelf a small, dusty box and opened it. Inside was a perfect pair of tiny leather shoes. Papa Panov smiled with satisfaction. Yes, they were as good as he had remembered, the best shoes he had ever made. "I should give him those," he decided, as he gently put them away and sat down again.

He was feeling tired now, and in no time at all Papa Panov was fast asleep. As he slept, he dreamed. He dreamed that someone was in his room, and he knew at once, as one does in dreams, who the person was. It was Jesus. 'You have been wishing that you could see me, Papa Panov,' Jesus said kindly, 'then look for me tomorrow. I will visit you. But look carefully, for I shall not tell you who I am.'

When Papa Panov awoke, it was morning, and a thin light was filtering through the shutters. He stood up and stretched himself for he was rather stiff. Then his face filled with happiness as he remembered his dream. This would be a very special day, for Jesus was coming to visit him. He wondered how would Jesus look? Would he be a little baby, as at that first Christmas? Would he be a grown man, a carpenter – or the great King that he is, God's Son? He must carefully watch the whole day through so that he recognized Jesus however he came.

Papa Panov put on a pot of coffee for his breakfast, took down the shutters and looked out of the window. The street was deserted, no one was stirring yet. No one that is, except the road sweeper. He looked miserable as usual in the raw cold and bitter freezing mist.

Papa Panov opened the shop door, letting in a thin stream of cold air. 'Come in!' he shouted across the street cheerily. 'Come and have some hot coffee to keep out the cold!'

The sweeper looked up, scarcely able to believe his ears. He was only too glad to put down his broom and come into the warm room. His old clothes steamed gently in the heat of the stove. He clasped both red hands around the comforting warm mug as he drank.

Papa Panov watched him with satisfaction, but every now and then his eyes strayed to the window. It would never do to miss his special visitor. 'Expecting someone?' the sweeper asked. So, Papa Panov told him about his dream. 'Well, I hope Jesus comes,' the sweeper said, 'you've given me a bit of comfort I never expected to have today. I'd say you deserve to have your dream come true.'

When he had gone, Papa Panov put on cabbage soup for his dinner, then went to the door again, scanning the street. He saw no one. But... he was mistaken. Someone was coming! A girl walked so slowly and quietly, hugging the walls of shops and houses, that it was a while before he noticed her. She looked so tired, and she was carrying something. As she drew nearer, he could see that it was a baby, wrapped in a thin shawl. There was such sadness in the girl's face and in the pinched little face of the baby, that Papa Panov's heart went out to them.

'Won't you come in?' he called, stepping outside to meet them. 'You both need a warm fire and a rest.' The young mother let him shepherd her indoors and to the comfort of the armchair. She gave a big sigh of relief. 'I'll warm some milk for the baby,' Papa Panov said, 'I've had children of my own – I can feed her for you.' He took the warmed milk from the stove and carefully fed the baby from a spoon, warming her tiny feet by the stove at the same time.

'She needs shoes,' the cobbler said. But the young mother replied, 'I can't afford shoes, I'm on my way to the next village to find work.' A sudden thought flashed into Papa Panov's mind. He remembered the little shoes he had looked at last night. But ... he had been keeping those for Jesus. He looked again at the cold little feet and made up his mind. He went and found the shoes. 'Try these on her,' he said, handing the baby and the shoes to the mother. The beautiful little shoes were a perfect fit. The girl smiled happily, and the baby gurgled with pleasure. 'You have been so kind to us,' the young mother said, as she got up with her baby to go. 'May all your wishes come true!'

But Papa Panov was beginning to wonder if his very special wish would come true. Perhaps he had missed his visitor? He looked anxiously up and down the street. He saw the usual beggars there – and Papa Panov hurried indoors to fetch them some hot soup and a generous hunk of bread. Hurrying out again in case he missed the Important Visitor!

All too soon the winter dusk fell. When Papa Panov next went to the door and strained his eyes, he could no longer make out the passers-by. Most people were home and indoors by now anyway. He walked slowly back into his room, put up the shutters and sat down wearily in his armchair. So, it had been just a dream after all. Jesus had not come.

Suddenly, he knew that he was no longer alone in the room. This was no dream for he was wide awake. At first, he seemed to see before his eyes the people who had come to him that day. He saw again the old road sweeper, the young mother and her baby and the beggars he had fed. As they passed, each one said. 'Didn't you see me, Papa Panov?' 'Who are you?' he called out, bewildered.

Then another voice answered him. It was the voice from his dream – the voice of Jesus. 'I was hungry, and you fed me, I was naked, and you clothed me. I was cold and you warmed me. I came to you today in every one of those you helped and welcomed.'

All was quiet and still. Only the sound of the big clock ticking. A great peace and happiness seemed to fill the room, overflowing Papa Panov's heart. He wanted to burst out singing and laughing and dancing with joy. Jesus did come after all!' was all he said.

As you listened to this story, to the scriptures and other words spoken or sung, saw the visuals including the advent banner on the side wall, what is your take-away from the service so far this morning? Have you experienced any invitations from God that you might act on this Advent season?

The invitation that stands out for me is to watch for God's surprising visits each day, while I wait to celebrate Jesus's birth - and anticipate his coming again. To see who the street-sweepers, mothers & children, and beggars are in my life and discern how God is calling and gifting me to respond to their needs in ways that help restore the world to how God created it to be.

One example I've thought of is to look in my closets for the things that I am saving, in case I might need them some day, and give them to people, who need them today!

Before our hymn of response video "View the Present Thro' The Promise" we will have a short time of silence to give you a little more time to think about your take-aways.