

# Watching

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*And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch (Mark 13:37).*

I STEP OUTSIDE MY NEW YORK CITY apartment, and my eyes become observant, sharp, peeled to anything that moves. I am watching for signs of the Second Coming.

On the corner of 79th and 2d streets I see a man in a business suit. In his left hand he holds a half-empty pizza box. The two slices of pizza in the box are pepperoni. His right hand holds a third slice, half-eaten. His right leg is bent so that the sole of his shoe rests on the wall of the synagogue in back of him. The grease from the pizza drips onto his knee. His head is thrown back; he laughs uncontrollably. I can see chewed pieces of pizza in his mouth. He who has eyes to see let him see.

*And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold (Matt. 24:12).*

I take the subway to the Village and walk down Broadway towards the NYU library, lost in thoughts about the paper I am in the midst of writing.

"I LEFT HER. I AIN'T GONNA TAKER HER SHIT! I AIN'T GONNA BE HER SLAVE ANYMORE. NOSSIR. I AIN'T GONNA BE THE SLAVE OF THAT BASTARD REAGAN AND I AIN'T GONNA BE HER SLAVE!" A man with a dirty face and ragged teddy bear yells this at me, suddenly accosting me, leaning toward my face with eyes that seem to rotate. I quickly lower my head and walk on. He confronts the person in back of me.

"I AIN'T GONNA BE HER SLAVE ANYMORE!"

I no longer hear his voice as I am already thinking of my paper again. I turn on Waverly and head toward the library.

*And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give such in those days (Matt. 24:19).*

One afternoon, my wife at work and I bored of my studies, I decided to call James, who along with his wife and three-year-old daughter Nancy

are friends of ours. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, I asked what he has been up to.

"Yesterday we had a wild time coming home from the restaurant."

"Why? What happened?"

"We were heading home. I was pushing Nancy in the stroller on the street side of Katie when we hear someone yell, 'Stop, thief!' I glanced in back of me just in time to be shoved against Katie by this guy carrying a woman's purse and swearing profusely. I bumped against Katie, lost my balance, and fell over, carrying the stroller with me. Nancy fell out, scraped her head, and started crying. Up ahead the cops had caught up with this guy, rammed his head onto the wall, and were swearing loudly at him, cuffing him and so on. Katie picked Nancy up, wiped the blood from her forehead, and tried to shield her from the scene. Once we got ourselves together, we retreated and took a different way home. We were worried about Nancy, but she seemed fine once the pain stopped. By the end of the day she was laughing and playing, but then at about three this morning she woke up screaming."

*And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God (Rev. 15:1).*

My wife and I are running late for church, which starts at 8:30 a.m.—a beastly hour everyone admits, but with four wards and a branch meeting in the same building, what can you do? We have stepped off the bus and are hurrying towards the door when a thin black man with a vaguely puzzled yet knowing look stops us.

"Sir, ma'am. I'm sorry to stop you like this, really. It's just that I've had it. Sir, ma'am—you look great, very elegant. No one will give me any money, but you see I can't take it anymore. I've got to get the drugs out of my system. All I need is a dollar fifteen for a token so I can go to the detox center. I'm not bad. I don't steal. I just ask for a dollar fifteen. You look so nice. Can't you give me a dollar fifteen?"

I, fumbling in my pocket, come up with a token. "Well, I've got an actual token," I say and hand it to him.

He grabs it in his fist and raises it above his head. "My man!" he says to no one in particular, then turns quickly around and runs toward the Lincoln Center subway stop.

I involuntarily think, "I wonder what he really wants a dollar fifteen for."

*For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:24).*

A few weeks ago, since I was spending the day in the public library, I met my wife for lunch. We went to a small diner on 51st Street and had ordered before I noticed a group of loud businessmen to our left. One, particularly handsome—blond hair, tanned, muscular, and well dressed—was talking loudly, and most of the others egged him on, laughing hard at what he said. Only one man did not seem part of the group; rather than laughing he slowly shook his head, his eyes splayed open in disbelief.

"Let me get this straight," he asked, "you want to find a cure for AIDS but then maintain control over it so that you can dispense it, or rather *not* dispense it to certain people?"

"Absolutely."

The other man looked at him distrustfully and then shook his head again. "You're not serious."

"Of course I am," the handsome man protested, his teeth flashing. "If I possessed the cure I would only give it to the innocent ones."

"And who—according to you—are the innocent ones?"

"Oh, you know—kids, those who acquire it through blood transfusions, those types."

"So the others would not receive the cure because they deserve the disease?"

"Naturally. Now in some instances, it may be difficult to decide; some heterosexuals may not deserve—hell, most probably don't. How to distinguish? That's something that remains to be worked out." Some of the men in the group laughed.

"You're unbelievable."

"What? I don't understand," the handsome man said. Was he serious? He kept protesting his earnestness, but there was a glint in his eye, his face showed the hint of a grin. It was hard to tell.

*Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you (Matt. 21:31).*

The next Sunday our elder's quorum president asked for a volunteer to go with Dave, a member of the bishopric, to take the sacrament to Bob, an AIDS patient in the ward. The ensuing silence was embarrassing, and even though I had to correct some exams, I raised my hand from pure shame.

On the subway Dave filled me in on how badly Bob had deteriorated over the last few weeks, but I was still unprepared for the sight of his pale, brittle body, his scratchy eye, and nervous hiccups that tore through the length of his body. Dave later told me that Bob had had the hiccups for two months.

Dave introduced me. "How are you?" I asked. (Stupid question—how does he look?) He murmured an "okay," but I looked at Dave awkwardly. Dave, who had known Bob for some time, was much more adept at this than I, probably because he thought of Bob, not of himself or his own horror. Dave told him about church, the people who wanted to say hello, the message the bishop delivered in sacrament meeting. Bob smiled, holding Dave's hand.

We blessed the sacrament, and when Bob took it, his eyes, which had earlier looked so hopeless, sprung to life. But that exertion seemed to tire him, and attempting to smile, he asked us to let him rest.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" I asked. (Another stupid question.)

"No—thank you," he replied, still with the slight smile. "I have sinned and now am paying for it." His eyes seemed moist when he said this, but were they moist when we came in? "All I hope for is to die and for God to be merciful."

And so we left, retreated into the unmerciful city, where we wait to pay for our own sins.

*Take yea heed and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch (Mark 13:33-34).*

Leslie and I are on our way out the door. We are meeting Steve and Graceanne for a movie and are running late. As we descend the stairs, Leslie says, "We need to stop by the bank before we go."

"Why? We have \$20 don't we? We can go after the movie."

"Well—don't be mad—but we only have \$10. I spent the other ten. I bought someone dinner and forgot to go get some more money later."

"You bought someone dinner? What do you mean?"

"Well, I was walking back from the cleaners and this homeless woman came up to me and asked if I would buy her dinner. I've always promised myself that if someone asked me for food rather than money I would comply. So I did. Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad you bought her dinner, but \$10?"

"Well, we were right next to that restaurant I like, and she wanted spaghetti and meatballs, and so I just went in and ordered it take out for her, paid, and then left. Don't be mad. I probably shouldn't have spent so much money, but it was something I wanted to do and it felt right so I did it."

"I'm not mad," I insisted again as, now on the street, we turned south towards the bank. But I felt the frustrated anger rise in my voice against my will, and at that moment I despised my helpless selfishness.

*Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left (Matt. 24:40).*

Later as we were in a cab stopped for a red light, two teenagers in a truck pulled up alongside us, lowered their windows, and proceeded to beat the top of the cab with a baseball bat, all the while swearing and threatening.

We had been to the movie in mid-town and had decided to head down to the Village to see Steve's new apartment and so had hailed a cab and shot down Second Avenue. Relegated to the front seat, I had turned back to carry on a conversation that Steve and I had begun concerning some obscure academic issue. The cab driver had seemed new to the city, asking the best way to Thompson Street in a bare, broken English.

Then, confused by the sudden violence, he had lowered his window to ask: "What I do? What I do?"

The light by this time has turned green. "Just drive. Don't ask questions. Drive."

"But what I do?"

"Drive. Please, please drive."

He pulls away and we see the truck of teenagers clumsily attempt to follow us. Both teenagers are leaning out of the truck windows, shouting obscenities, threats, ethnic slurs. They had seemed like two nice, middle-class, white jocks from New Jersey who had come into the city to beat up some gay people but had decided that immigrant cab drivers were also an acceptable target.

"What I do?" the driver questions me.

"You're evidently driving on *their* road," I replied.

"What? What I do?"

"Nothing. They're crazy."

"Yes. Crazy."

*Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken and the other left (Matt. 24:41).*

On the first day of spring, when Washington Square was alive with relaxed students basking in the sun, street performers, and budding flowers, an elderly driver went a little insane and drove her car at 60 miles per hour through the eastern end of the park. She could not maintain control and careened from side to side, killing students on the benches that lined the path she had invaded. Her car finally came to a forced stop when it smashed into the huge stone base of the statue of Garibaldi. The car was totaled, fourteen students killed, many more injured. The driver limped out of the wrecked car, unharmed.

*Watch ye therefore: for ye know now when the master of the house cometh, at eleven, or at midnight, or at the cock crowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping (Mark 13:35-36).*

One Sunday morning our elders quorum president Martin told us what had happened to him and his wife the preceding evening.

Lisa and Martin have been to the movies in the East Village and are walking home. As they turn a corner, a woman comes running toward them, topless and screaming. Martin's first reaction is to step back, but Lisa grabs his arm and, looking at the woman, says, "Martin, we have to help her."

"How?" Martin asks.

The topless woman is now in the street, standing still. Lisa approaches her. "Do you need help?" she asks.

"Yes," the woman answers emphatically but not looking at her. Lisa takes her arm and leads her toward the sidewalk, makes her sit down. A crowd of curious onlookers, most of them male, have gathered and try to get a look at the woman. Martin blocks their view, his back to Lisa and the woman.

"Where's your shirt?" Lisa asks. They find it, and the woman puts it on, even though it is soaked. It is a cool evening, and the woman begins to tremble. Lisa puts her arms around her, holding her to keep her warm. Martin has stepped into a nearby movie theater and asks that they call an ambulance. He returns and waits. Ambulances can take forever.

"What religion are you," the woman suddenly asks Lisa.

"Mormon."

"I'm Catholic. Would you say a prayer?"

"Yes, I would like to do that." Lisa prays, still embracing the woman, who by now has stopped trembling. Lisa bows her head and Martin sees her lips move.

"Where's the damn ambulance?" Martin asks himself, looking at his watch. Forty minutes have gone by.

Lisa begins to hum the tune of a hymn softly. The woman becomes drowsy. The crowd of onlookers has dispersed. Martin, Lisa, and the woman wait. Finally the ambulance rounds the corner, and Mark flags it down looking at his watch. One hour has passed.

The paramedics bring out a stretcher, ask the woman and Lisa questions, and load the woman into the back of the ambulance. Lisa is holding her hand. The woman, by now very tired, looks up into Lisa's face. "Thank you. Pray for me."

"I will," Lisa answers. The woman smiles as the doors close. The driver gets in, and the ambulance pulls away. Martin and Lisa watch as the ambulance turns uptown and becomes lost in the late-night traffic.

*I once talked to a continental pastor who had seen Hitler, and had, by all human standards, good cause to hate him. "What did he look like?" I asked. "Like all men," he replied. "That is, like Christ" (C. S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm).*

It is about 11:00 on a Saturday night, and I am trying to put together my gospel doctrine lesson for the next morning on Matthew 24 and 25, two of my least favorite chapters in the New Testament. I am baffled, frustrated. I begin to talk to myself.

—I don't understand the emphasis on the Second Coming. Why should we watch? Why did you tell your disciples to watch when the coming was obviously far off? Or Joseph Smith? The Saints were convinced that you would come soon. For all we know your coming may be hundreds or thousands of years off.

—True. And yet, even if this is so, you should still watch.

—Why? And another thing: the signs of your coming—wars, rumors of wars, all the cryptic happenings in Revelation—they could apply to any time. When have there not been wars? Those poor Christians who first read John's vision thought it referred to their own times. As did medieval Christians, those during the Thirty Years War, and Saints ever since the Restoration. How can we watch when we don't know what we're watching for? when we see signs constantly, which is the same as not seeing any at all?

—I know. But you're missing the point. The value lies not in *my* coming but in *your* watching.

—I don't understand. How can my looking for the number of the beast have any value?

—You watch for the wrong things. The signs are always there, it is true. The world does not change in this; it is continually in need of its savior. You must watch for me in another way.

—What other way?

—Think about the end of my discourse that you're studying right now. I tell you how to watch.

—You do? You speak only of the last judgment; you strike fear into me which makes me want to watch but doesn't tell me *how*.

—Remember what I say to the blessed, those who will have watched:

Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked and ye clothed me: I was sick and ye visited me: I was in prison and ye came unto me.

And they become astonished, because of course they don't remember doing so.

—But what will be my response?

Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Don't you see? They watched for me, they saw me in those around them. I have come again every time a new child has come into the world. My light lights each one. They are the signs you should watch for. Watch for me and you will find me. My coming is this—when all of you see me in each other, I will already have come.