

# Paying Attention to God

A sermon in the 2020 Lenten Worship Series *"Watch and Pray"*

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- Psalm 95:1-7 (Good News Translation) Come, let us praise the LORD! Let us sing for joy to God, who protects us! <sup>2</sup> Let us come before him with thanksgiving and sing joyful songs of praise. <sup>3</sup> For the LORD is a mighty God, a mighty king over all the gods. <sup>4</sup> He rules over the whole earth, from the deepest caves to the highest hills. <sup>5</sup> He rules over the sea, which he made; the land also, which he himself formed. <sup>6</sup> Come, let us bow down and worship him; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! <sup>7</sup> He is our God; we are the people he cares for, the flock for which he provides.
- Matthew 26:36-46 (Good News Translation) <sup>36</sup> Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." <sup>37</sup> He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. Grief and anguish came over him, <sup>38</sup> and he said to them, "The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me. Stay here and keep watch with me." <sup>39</sup> He went a little farther on, threw himself face downward on the ground, and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me! Yet not what I want, but what you want." <sup>40</sup> Then he returned to the three disciples and found them asleep; and he said to Peter, "How is it that you three were not able to keep watch with me for even one hour? <sup>41</sup> Keep watch and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." <sup>42</sup> Once more Jesus went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cup of suffering cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done." <sup>43</sup> He returned once more and found the disciples asleep; they could not keep their eyes open. <sup>44</sup> Again Jesus left them, went away, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. <sup>45</sup> Then he returned to the disciples and said, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look! The hour has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to the power of sinners. <sup>46</sup> Get up, let us go. Look, here is the man who is betraying me!"
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: This season of Lent provides us with encouragement to watch for God's presence in our lives and to pray to be useful for God's activity in our world.

Although you may have never visited Denison Avenue United Church of Christ, you've probably driven near it dozens, even hundreds of times. The church is in Cleveland, just south of Interstate 90, a little east of the intersection of West Boulevard and Lorain Avenue. It's an imposing brick structure intended to convey the grandeur of Almighty God. It probably was built in the early 1900s in an old residential neighborhood sprinkled with shops that at one time supported family business—perhaps a grocery, a laundry, a diner, a drug store, that sort of thing.

Denison Avenue United Church of Christ (or "UCC") has been in the news in recent months because they chose to help another church. St. Malachi's on the near west side collaborates with a non-profit called the Metanoia Project to provide a shelter for homeless persons during the winter months. (You might remember the Metanoia Project from our "Alternative Christmas" Charity Bazaar last year.) A few months back St. Malachi was told that they had to reduce the number of clients they housed overnight because they were exceeding the capacity allowed by the fire code.

The pastor and people of Denison Ave. UCC responded by making arrangements to pick up homeless clients from the St. Malachi area and transport them three miles to their church. Denison Ave. UCC offers them a free meal, a cot in a warm, safe and dry fellowship hall, and access to a shower, and then drives the people back to their familiar St. Malachi neighborhood the next the morning.

It didn't take long before some people voiced objection to this neighborhood church offering shelter from the winter weather to women and men who were otherwise living on the streets. A few area residents were concerned about homeless strangers being brought into their neighborhood, even if only for overnight. A city official protested that the church should not be in the hotel business. The church responded that it was offering hospitality to strangers in the name of Jesus Christ. The church was ordered to cease their shelter program because they didn't have a sprinkler system which is a requirement for commercial facilities providing overnight accommodations. A local foundation responded by donating fire extinguishers to the church.

As we enter the month of March Denison Avenue UCC is hosting homeless people overnight. What did they have to do to satisfy (temporarily, at least) the powers-that-be? The church has had to arrange for volunteers who spend the entire night continuously walking through the building. While others sleep, these volunteers stay awake keeping watch, walking through the entire church, attentive to any signs that there might be a fire. Among the volunteers from the greater community who have vowed to keep watch for the sake of the homeless guests from Cleveland's west side are some Presbyterian friends from Lakewood and a former neighbor of ours who now lives in Avon Lake.

Most of us probably don't keep watch very often. Even on New Year's Eve as many are keeping watch for the end of one year and the start of another, I, for one, prefer sleeping to keeping watch. Thankfully, there are people who keep watch for us:

- Police officers and firefighters keep watch night and day for the safety of the community;
- College basketball fans may keep watch as the outcomes of tournament games across the country bolster or destroy their March Madness brackets.
- With the "snow day" dreams of children resting upon them, school superintendents keep watch as forecasted winter storms either descend with a vengeance or peter out with not so much as a whimper.
- Family members might keep watch at the bedside of a loved one who just underwent serious surgery or a dear one whose frail and failing body is going through the difficult work of letting go of the last vestiges of life.

Yes, though we may be reluctant to stay awake and attentive, thank goodness there are some in our lives who keep watch for us.

As we heard in this morning's gospel reading, on the night Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples, he took them for a walk. They went from Jerusalem's Mt. Zion neighborhood down into the Kidron Valley separating Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. There, in a grove of olive trees commonly known as the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus spoke to them.

With full stomachs and with wine working its magic on their attentiveness, Jesus told the disciples, “Sit here. I’ll be back. I need to pray.” He motioned for James, John and Peter to follow him. Separated from the rest, he told them, “You stay here and keep watch with me.” Then Jesus stepped away from them and fell to the ground in intense, heartfelt prayer. Five minutes later... or fifteen?... or thirty?... or more?... Jesus went back seeking the emotional support of the three... only to find Peter and James and John all asleep. “You couldn’t keep watch with me?” he despaired. He went off to pray again, and again, and each time he returned, his followers had let him down – they hadn’t kept watch as he had asked.

From our perspective, knowing what Jesus was about to face, we think “Shame on them! How could they not do that for their dear friend and teacher?” They failed to keep watch. They failed to stay awake. They failed to be aware and attentive to the presence and activity of God in their midst.

But we know that we probably would have been right there with them, head on our neighbor’s shoulder, eyes closed, breathing the slow, deep, rhythmic breaths of sleep.

How can we be more attentive to God’s presence and activity in our lives? That’s what I invite you to join me in exploring during this season of Lent. Our theme of “Watch and Pray” allows us to consider how prayer enables us to be more aware of God’s constant presence in our daily lives. In the weeks ahead we can discover how prayer can help us grow to be more attuned to what God gives to us and what God asks of us.

- We’ll consider how the familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer might take on a more powerful meaning, offering you a new focus every Sunday, or maybe every day.
- We will ask what difference it makes for us to pray for others, and ways our watchfulness might guide us in who and what we pray for.
- We’ll learn about a biblical prayer tradition modern Christians don’t know much about: noticing and then praying for points of sorrow and suffering and injustice that are present in our world.
- We’ll consider how our watchful attentiveness to God’s presence may even prompt us to put our prayerful awareness into action – like the individuals whose prayers for Cleveland’s homeless prompted them to volunteer to patrol the hallways and stairwells and rooms of Denison Avenue United Church of Christ while homeless persons slumber as guests in the house that God built.

Let’s use this season of Lent as a time to “Watch and Pray.” Let’s welcome an opportunity to strengthen and deepen and enrich our prayer life as individuals and as a church. Let us watch for God’s presence in our lives and pray to be useful for God’s activity in our world.