

“Watchfulness”

Ezekiel 3:16-21; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 24:32-44

July 21, 2019

For the want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For the want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For the want of a horse, the rider was lost;
For the want of a rider, the battle was lost;
For the want of the battle, the kingdom was lost;
- And all for the want of a horseshoe nail!

I think it was Benjamin Franklin who penned those words, expressing in a nutshell the truths we learn from history, and which we indeed learn from our own individual lives.

The city of Constantinople fell in 1453 to the Turks, as every school child knows, or at least used to know. How was the battle won? It was not an overwhelmingly forceful army that turned the tide. It was not artillery or battering rams that crushed the walls of the defenders. It was not superior firepower or cleverness. Rather, one night the enemy discovered one gate to the city had been left unlocked. And an entire army swarmed through it.

So it was too with the fall of Quebec to the English in 1759, when the British found one footpath up the unscalable mountainside undefended. The following morning, the city surrendered.

Just one word uttered, one deed done, one glance of the eye, one thought, can change your life. Oh, it might not seem so at the time. But when you look back over the years, how easily we can see great turning points which at the time were barely noticed in the day-to-day hubbub of living.

A student might decide to change courses, and thus meet an instructor who will profoundly influence them. You might end up going to a party or reception that you weren't too sure about attending in the first place, and renew an acquaintance with someone you had not seen or spoken to for years. The person you have married might

have been met on a plane, at the door of a shop, or while stopping for coffee at the mall. You never know. You can never be sure. For what might seem terribly important often is not, and what might appear to be insignificant can be very profound. Who knows what train of thought might be triggered in someone's mind from reading a book? Or dropping a card to a forgotten friend? Or visiting someone in a convalescent home? Mountains of good might proceed from it.

Given the unexpectedness of life - I am reminded of C. S. Lewis, who was able to write the book Surprised by Joy - given the importance, or potential importance, of each moment; given the existence of a God who can, and does, intervene in the affairs of a humanity looking for meaning in an often-empty world, looking for love in a cold world, looking for peace in a war-torn world - given all these things, is there any wonder that one of the basic messages of Jesus was - "Watch!"

It has been said that Luck is nothing more than being prepared to take advantage of an opportunity. And being prepared to take advantage means that we must be aware of every opportunity that God would present to us in our lives. But how can we be aware? How can we prepare ourselves? And how do we tell what an opportunity might look like?

Being aware is one of the great problems of scripture, and since scripture is a reflection of life itself, I venture to say that being aware is a great problem for just about everyone. Yet how can we be aware when the daily humdrum and routine of life wears down our perceptions, until we are lulled into a mindless day-to-day kind of living? As Jesus reminds us in Matthew's gospel, this was one of the problems in the days of Noah. Everybody, it seems, was so immersed in eating and drinking and getting on in life that they did not see the signs, hear the call, respond to the Word. And if you think that eating and drinking aren't matters we get caught up in, just ask any average American male what his mind is on at 12:45pm if lunch has not appeared yet. The significance of the stomach is often the rule of life for us.

This is the problem the Apostle Paul wrote of time and time again in his letters to the churches. “Be ready!” You never know where the enemy may strike, so wear the whole armor of God. We never know when we will be called upon, so always be prepared. We never know how the crisis will come: Paul certainly would have known what some of us baseball-crazed Americans mean when we say that life has a way of throwing us a curve ball every now and then.

On the night when Jesus was betrayed, Peter thought he was being cautious enough, following Jesus at a distance after the arrest in Gethsemane. Peter was close enough to see what was going on, but not close enough to get into any kind of trouble himself. Or so he thought - till he was caught off guard. We know the story: suddenly a woman, who appeared out of nowhere, asked the question of the hour: Are you not a follower of the Galilean? Peter froze. Yes, he was tired, having been through an emotion-charged night in the Upper Room, through a fitful sleep in the Garden, where he was suddenly set upon by the Roman guard. Certainly Peter’s guard was down when he figured that everyone was interested only in Jesus, the ringleader, only to find out that the Romans were after the followers of Jesus, as well. Life will often test us just at those moments, and we may find that for the want of a horseshoe nail, all might be lost.

The saying of Benjamin Franklin, the story of the fall of great cities, the incident involving Peter and his denial of Christ - all these events seem to emphasize the alone-ness of our task, or work, or journey. But the prophet Ezekiel raises another note: when we see that someone else is not getting the point, not realizing the will or presence of God in their lives, we have an obligation to speak up. If we see the significance of what another might see as insignificant, then we are responsible for that other person’s welfare.

For Christianity, living the faith, means getting involved. We need to involve ourselves in the lives of others like ourselves who seek to follow Him, to get involved in helping others who might be stumbling along the way. We must all play our parts - if

someone leaves the strategic footpath unguarded, fill the gap. If someone else leaves the gate unlocked, secure it. If someone would deny Christ, help bring them to a remembrance of all that God means to those who call ourselves His own.

Some of us may not like the sound of that. There is a fine line between being your brother's keeper and telling someone else how to live their life. Yet not to feel responsible for our fellow human beings is to adhere to what I call the great American heresy: that religion can be lived in isolation, and that each individual is the entire body of Christ, instead of just part of it, working with other persons to form a glorious whole, which we call The Church. Yes, we can pray to God in private; but it is also significant that we have been called together as one body to bear witness collectively to eternal truths. Yes, we will be judged as individuals - you can't pass through The Judgment on someone else's laurels. But it is also significant that the standards by which we are to be judged are based on how we have lived with one another.

As Jesus himself reminds us, our God is best served by serving others. And as we are told in Matthew's Gospel, Christ has said: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as you have done it to the **least** of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

Let us pray: