

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

MINUTEMEN

Sermon for Advent 1A-Is 2:1-5, Rom 13:11-14, Mt 24:36-44

LPC, 12/12/13

*Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.
'Twas the eighteenth of April in 'seventy-five.
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.*

Now, what does that poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow have to do with the first Sunday of Advent? Listen, my children, and you shall hear.

I grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts, one of those “Middlesex villages and farms” to which Paul Revere reputedly spread the alarm that April night. Lexington is steeped in the lore of the early American Revolution. Minutemen are not just a thing of the past.

Minutemen, as you probably know, were colonists who were prepared to fight for their freedom on a minute’s notice. Alerted by Paul Revere to the approach of British regulars, minutemen in Lexington and Concord rallied quickly to oppose their progress. The well-trained, well-armed British made short work of the ragtag farmers of Lexington, but en route to Concord the feisty Americans made the British pay, and the American Revolution began in earnest.

The image of the alert, ready, passionate Minutemen being a match for the best-trained army in the world is strongly appealing to Americans. An image of the Minuteman that stands in Concord has been adopted by the National Rifle Association as an emblem. The Concord statue shows the man leaving his plow to take up arms against tyranny. This is an idealized representation, since the Minutemen mobilized during the night hours, from their beds, rather than leaving their fields during the day, but the point is that they were prepared to leave whatever they were doing to fight for freedom. This is an ideal that is still deeply rooted in the American psyche.

So, what do Minutemen have to do with Advent? Advent is all about readiness, alertness, being awake. The Letter from Romans even talks of laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light. This sounds a lot to me like the Minuteman leaving his bed (or his plow) to pick up his musket and wait. In a way, Advent calls us Christians to be spiritual Minutemen.

The same commitment, the same willingness to sacrifice and take a stand, the same passion that motivated the Minutemen is also our passion as Christians, as we await the coming of Jesus into the world at Christmas, and as we anticipate his coming again at the end of time.

Now obviously there’s a basic difference. The Minutemen were waiting for the arrival of an enemy, whereas we are awaiting our salvation. They were ready to fight, we

need to be ready to welcome. But our eyes are focused on the horizon with the same intensity.

Now, obviously I'm using figurative language. What exactly does it mean, in practical terms, to focus intently on the horizon for God's coming? For one thing, it means to turn from sin. The Letter to the Romans lists some particular sins: reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy. This is not intended as an exhaustive list. The point is set aside self-indulgence of all sorts, because self-indulgence is inconsistent with following Jesus. Self-indulgence will not make us ready for Jesus. Self-dedication will.

Next, focusing on God's coming means to "live honorably." In other words, live as if everything you do were open to view. After all, everything you do is already open to God's view, we just sometimes think God won't notice our sly thoughts and moral compromises.

Finally, focusing on God's coming means to expect heaven to break through from time to time. We can't know when God's coming will happen in all its fullness, but we are given glimpses of what that kingdom is like. These are moments of grace: when darkness is, for a moment, cast away; when love does prevail; when a ray of light shines through; when human life does reflect the surpassing love of God.

Think about it: assuming this does happen, that we get glimpses of God's kingdom in the midst of our current existence, would you want to let a single glimpse pass by unnoticed? This is why we must be ready.

Like the Minutemen, we are told to be ready by arming ourselves, but obviously our armor, this so-called "armor of light" is different from the armor of warfare. What is this armor of light we are to put on during Advent? How about the night goggles that enable us to see God at work in the world? Or that help us to see our neighbors as we see ourselves?

For the remaining Sundays in Advent, we'll be talking more about the armor of light. There are key words in the Advent readings that can serve as pieces of this armor. The word I'd like to pull out of today's readings is the word "honor."

As spiritual Minutemen, let this be our drill for the next week: "What is the honorable thing to do? In what ways can I honor God? In what ways can I honor others?" May we be ready, at a minute's notice (or less) to honor God this Advent Season.