

**December 10, 2017**  
**Luke 1:26-37**  
**Keeping Watch in the Midst of a Mess**  
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In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, Amen.*

The year was 1930. In the main telegraph office not far from Times Square in New York City, a group of men sat waiting to be interviewed for a job opening as an operator. A terrible depression was on; times were tough and jobs very hard to come by. As the applicants sat waiting, they chatted nervously – all but one that is. He sat quietly with his head lowered in a corner. At times, the chatter grew louder due to some type of background static coming over the loudspeaker in the waiting room.

Then suddenly, to the surprise of everyone, the odd, quiet man jumped up, ran to an office marked "private", threw open the door, and ducked quickly inside. Well, this startled the remaining applicants and brought them all to silence. In just a few minutes, the door to the office reopened and the employer, along with the odd man emerged. The employer told them that they could all go home because the one who had just come into his office had been hired.

Befuddled and upset, one of the remaining men stood and asked the meaning of this. Why, the behavior of this man had been plain rude. How could he be rewarded for such awful behavior? The employer turned to his new hire and asked him to explain.

"While you all were all chatting," he said, "I sat here praying in silence. I felt anxious, and so I asked God to simply quiet my soul so that I might be able to accept God's will and God's way for me concerning this job.

"As I did this, I suddenly noticed behind the din of your voices the static that was being broadcast over the loudspeaker in the waiting room; as it turned out it was not static at all. It was

a message that was quite clear and one that was being tapped out over and over. The message was: “The one I need must always be on alert. The first one who interprets this and comes directly into my private office will be hired.”<sup>1</sup>

Our world today is awash with a constant, loud, blaring, cacophony of sound and fury, such that should God speaks to us, that message is in danger of being received as little more than worthless static.

And that’s not God’s problem. That is our problem – a spiritual problem – the ability to listen and respond to what is most important and to let the rest of it go.

Charles Hummel wrote a great little essay for Inter-Varsity Press that initially was used as a study guide for gatherings of Campus Crusade for Christ. The name of was “The Tyranny of the Urgent.” In it, Hummel tells us that being faithful is not about getting our priorities straight.

“Your *greatest* danger,” he says, “is letting the *urgent* things (in your life) crowd out the important things.”

Letting the urgent things, crowd out the important things.

The astounding fact is that Hummel first wrote these words in 1967

– back when you were lucky if you had one dial-up phone in your house that was shared by everyone there.

– back when administrators could tell their secretaries that they were not to be disturbed and that actually guaranteed that they really would *not* be disturbed.

Today we have these things (hold up cell phone). Perhaps the most marvelous invention on the planet and maybe also the most devilish. Our phones can and often are set to give us notifications by sound or by vibration or by both – whenever we receive not only a phone call, but a text message, an e-mail, or a posting from any number of social *media* sites, bulletin boards and news outlets. I counted the number of communication sources to which I *alone* am linked and for which I get programmed alerts. There are ten.

And I am 56 years old. I am not a child of the computer or the internet. The sources of information I consider important pale in comparison to those of a generation younger than me.

We would do well to listen to Hummel, who says our greatest danger spiritually, is acting as if everything that comes to us marked “urgent” is also *always* important.

And I fear these days that many of us have given up on responding to what might be important altogether, favoring instead to respond to those things that will make us feel the best the quickest. After all, those things marked “urgent” are always going to be relatively important to somebody. Better to ignore that weightier stuff altogether and stick to lighter fare.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*, Assurance Publishers, 1985, pg. 1588.

I think the thing that continues to make Hummel's essay relevant is that, unlike a lot of what I would judge as shallow, Christian self-help fluff that has come from InterVarsity Press over the years, Hummel's essay is one that doesn't offer bullet-points of a program for us to follow. Instead it points to the Gospel accounts of Jesus that demonstrate how, although he knew his time was short, he was a man who never seemed to be in a hurry – not even when his good friend Lazarus was dying.

Hummel begins by quoting Mark 1:35 which says: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."

Hummel says that the secret of Jesus' life and work for God was that of waiting mindfully for His Father's instructions – instructions from within. (Pause)

The headline for this section of Hummel's essay reads "*Dependence Makes You Free.*" There Hummel proposes that, "The worst sin is prayerlessness."<sup>2</sup> Prayerlessness. (Pause)

But what Hummel meant by prayer was: not talking to God in order to tell God what *we* want, but prayer as disciplined, intentional removal of ourselves from the distractions of this world in order to listen and be alert to what *God* might want from us. It is an all-out attempt at allowing *God* to set our priorities. Allowing God to discern what is important for us.

Every year we hear a lot about how terribly messy the Christmas season is with its emphasis on the economy, the commercialism, the lack of Christ as its focus, the extra chores, the many extra things to think about and to do. But this year is different. This year, we are being told for the first time since 1962 that we may be in danger of a nuclear attack from a foreign power and the first time since 1973 that our president may be impeached. Skin heads and Nazis have a legitimate platform and a war is being waged on the poor and the outsider.

This should give pause for us all to stop and prayerfully consider what is most important. When we do, then maybe we can truly hear what folks like Biblical theologian, Walter Brueggemann have to say on the matter: "Our preparation for Christmas this year," he writes, "is not a safe, private or even familial enterprise but is preoccupied with great public issues of war and peace and issues of economic justice that concern the worth and bodily well-being of human persons. Thus, our Advent preparations this year invite us to consider ways in which we ourselves are complicit in the deep inhumanity of our current world." Walter Brueggemann, *Gift and Task: A Year of Daily Readings and Reflections*.

Ouch! Things are indeed pretty messy the world over. But the fact is that if we take seriously the scriptures, then

- *when* we find ourselves in the midst of chaos and events that threaten to overwhelm us
- *when* life appears to be the messiest it can possibly be
- *when* peace seems to be a luxury –

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<sup>2</sup> Hummel, Charles E., *Tyranny of the Urgent*, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Downers Grove, IL 60515, 1967.

Far from it being the time when we ought to throw in the towel – it is rather the best time to begin looking for a new holy birth in our midst – the coming of something Divine and utterly new in our lives.

Because, as odd as it sounds, God seems to do God's greatest work out of a mess – out of chaos – whether that mess is of God's making, ours or both.

Consider Genesis 1. There we are reminded that before the creation of the universe, there is Chaos and this chaos, this messy mass of formless void is the very stuff God uses for making something brand new. God spends six Days bringing order to this chaos – then what happens on the seventh day? There is peace – God rests.

Or consider the time of the destruction of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple, thought to be the very footstool of God on Earth. The best and brightest of God's people are deported to Babylon leaving behind the helpless and the weak. It is arguably the messiest, most chaotic time in the life of God's people. Yet listen to the words of Jeremiah who speaks during this time:

“This is the covenant that I will make with the House of Israel after these days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34”

In the middle of the most horrible time for Israel recorded in the Bible, God promises the most amazing thing – that God will become so intimate with us that we will have the law of love in our hearts and teaching about God won't be necessary – and it won't be necessary because we will have God living in us.

And finally, who could forget the chaos of Gethsemane when the mob came and the disciples scattered. Yet out of the chaos of the death of God's Son comes a saving message of love and hope, a love and hope which finally issues in the Resurrection.

God does God's greatest work out of chaos.

What we need to do is find a way to listen for the *important* things amidst the discord of the many *urgent* things that come to us continually every day.

I used to think it was a terrible mistake to have two such big holidays, Christmas and New Year's on top of each other like they are; but there is a kind of wisdom in that: the hectic, messy, chaotic pace of Advent and Christmas giving way to the lull, even respite of a brand new year. It is a reminder every new year of how God works.

And the Advent/Christmas season can be particularly messy for those who have lost loved ones in the previous year or who have been through the break-up of a marriage and a family or those who suddenly find themselves without a job. (Pause)

Perhaps, in the midst of this mess we can learn something from Mary. For it is Mary who shows us that although faithful commitment to God's call often puts us in the very middle of the messes of the world, God yet offers us comfort by reminding us that God will be with us and that, with God, nothing is impossible.

Mary's simple response – "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." – will place her in the middle of the biggest mess there ever was – the mothering of the suffering servant of Israel – the witnessing of the betrayal and the death of her first born son. But in that mess Mary will experience a love and a joy and a peace that will defy description.

Anita Wheatcroft is a freelanced writer who wrote a little piece called "How Far to Bethlehem?" In it she relates a story from her childhood which I think really gets at the meaning of finding a way to listen to the voice of God in the midst of the blaring voices of self-centeredness, lies and deep corruption:

She writes:

"It happened in a large church in New York City where I grew up. During an annual Nativity pageant, the church was especially full. Hushed in darkness, the congregation watched the lighting of the candles. Toward the back, I sat, one timid little girl, with my family. Newly moved to the city after a family separation and trauma, I was still overwhelmed and homesick for my grandparents and familiar friends.

That night, however, caught up in awe as organ music rolled out from balcony to rafters, I heard a familiar story I loved, and was transported to another time and place. Suddenly, down the aisle swept a mass of colorful figures in procession as the lights went up, and looking to the place of their destination I finally spotted the magnificent manger scene. Then sights and sounds enveloped me with such intensity that I was dizzied by the wonderful chaos of it all – Travelers, bearded shepherds and finally the three kings bearing gifts and advancing majestically. Before anyone knew it, I found myself following them.

The journey down that long aisle was an early spiritual pilgrimage for me, yet it felt like a kind of homecoming. When I reached the manger scene, there were a sleepy donkey, real smelly sheep, and Mary and Joseph beneath an angel with outstretched wings. Above all, there was a light in the manger, enfolding us in its glow. Kneeling in front of it, I had a sense of exaltation, of self-offering as real as any I have ever known since.

This *was* real to me, and I was there. Of course, it didn't last long. I was lifted to my feet by an usher and carried down the aisle, back to my embarrassed family, and the pageant swept on. I was vaguely aware of subdued smiles, and my parents' whispered scolding; but none of that mattered. My discovery was my own, and I had something now that no one could ever take from me. I had been to Bethlehem. In one chaotic moment, I had yielded to the call of God and as a result, I had seen it all for the first time and I would never forget it." (Anita Wheatcroft, "How Far to Bethlehem?", Fellowship in Prayer, 47, December 1996, 37-38.)

And Jesus says, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

Let us pray. O Christ Help us find the courage in mess of our world to be still and know that you are God – to yield to the sheer wonder of Your call and your plan of the birth of a savior - not just for us but for the whole world that indeed, we, like Mary, may find a way to pay attention to what really matters in the midst of this mess.

And now bless these gifts that we give that they may help a distracted world know what is most important to you. We pray these things in Christ’s name, Amen.