GOD'S JUDGMENT AND OUR SECURITY

-- a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
The Twenty Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
November 13, 1966

"When people say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. ...So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober."(I Thessalonians 5:3-6)

This week over 2700 undergraduates signed a letter to the Secretary of Defense expressing regret "for the unruly behavior of a small group of students" during the Secretary's visit to their college. That means that half the student body at that gracious institution disapproves of unruly behavior. An amazing display of sentiment! And these students, of course, were not alone. The administration of the college expressed shock. Even liberal commentators on radio and in the press expressed their regret. Imagine, shouting down the Secretary of Defense!

But an outspoken editor of Ramparts, that Roman Catholic magazine, seemed to have a point earlier in the day when he addressed that unruly crowd from the top of a car. He asked, what indeed is good taste in our day? Is it good taste to drop napalm on Vietnamese villages? Is it good taste to feel proud when the enemy's death count for the week hits a new high? What is good taste? That's the prior question, isn't it? When we answer that question, then perhaps we will still want to express regret over those few unruly students. But I think it's incumbent upon us to answer the prior question first. What is good taste in such a context?

Taking a cue from our text, I propose we think in terms of staying awake, that is, not being drowsy with security.

Most of us, I take it, enjoy not a little bit of peace and security. To begin with, we know where our next meal is coming from. Our lives are not burdened with the search for food. Likewise, we who live in this area have some of the best medical care in the world. Neither hunger nor disease very often shakesthe foundations of our daily life. That's fairly obvious. But what isn't obvious is the answer to this question: how much does the peace and security of our full stomachs and disease-free bodies influence the way we order our lives? How easy is it for us to slip into the ideology of the ruling classes, which Karl Marx, and before him the prophet Amos, described so well? How easy is it for us to shape our personal and political decisions according to what best preserves our supply of food and medical care? How easy is it for us to slumber in physical security?

But food and medical care are not our only securities. Consider the peculiar security of academic distance. The Secretary of Defense replied to the college's apology by saying that he attributed the demonstration to students who allowed their "zeal to exceed (their) judgment." That's the academic ideal. Never let your zeal exceed your judgment. That's what the ivy-covered walls are all about. Keep out the untutored zealousness of the world in order to examine issues carefully and critically. Surely no one who knows anything about the university wants to tear down the ivy-covered walls which give the university its independence from society. Yet the question can be raised: how much do we depend on the security of our academic distance when we are ordering our lives, personally and politically?

James Luther Adams of Harvard Divinity School has told how sociologists were enlisted during the Second World War to help indoctrinate American troops concerning the evils of Nazism. A number of sociologists refused, on the grounds of cultural relativism. The Nazis have their system and we have ours, they said, and we cannot judge between them. Was this academic distance, or was this self-elevation into a comfortable plane above the complex moral exigencies of history? How easy is it for us to slumber in the security of academic distance?

-2-

"When people say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. ...So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober."

These words have their immediate force because they look to a imminent coming of the end of the world. Much of the New Testament was written with this expectation, as you know. But I hope to talk about the end of the world next week.(!) What we need to underline this morning is the urgency of the Christian Life, as St. Paul depicts it. The Christian, according to Paul, is one who is responsive to "the times and the seasons"(I Thes. 5:1), one who is watchful, -- urgently watchful. The Christian is one who, unlike many others, is not lulled asleep by peace and security. So, however much you may want to shape your life by the canons of good taste, if you also want to be a Christian, you will be urgently responsive to the signs of the times.

In 1938, a significant year, at least on the Continent, -- a well-known English writer gave this testimonial: "I am not my brother's keeper," he said. "I cannot bring myself to judge my fellows. I am content to observe him." In this respect the biblical writings are not enlightened. If anything in the Bible is clear, from the story of Cain and Abel on, it is that we are our brother's keeper. We are in this world not to languish in peace and security, maybe observing our brother from a distance. We are in this world to cross over the sometimes rough and broken way which separates us from our brother. That's at least part of what it means to stay awake.

Our Epistle lesson says, for example, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." The Christian community is a group of people who are responsive to each other's needs. This was quite clear, and is quite clear, in situations of persecution. There's nothing that quite so opens up the flow of mutual love in the Church as a threat from the outside. This is perhaps the chief difference between the Church in East Germany and the Church in West Germany. In the East common concern and mutual upbuilding are noticeable. In the West the visitor more than once meets an apparent indifference and an apparent self-satisfaction.

That doesn't mean that we should seek out persecution. It does mean, I think, that we should work twice as hard to be responsive to those with whom we worship. ... The first step in this direction may be as simple as introducing yourself to someone you don't know this morning. "Therefore encourage one another and build another up, as you are doing."

But this text from Paul doesn't present the full range of biblical thinking about being your brother's keeper, about staying responsive to the signs of the times. The biblical writers envision the brother not only as the one who's in the Church and who needs encouragement, but also as the one who is outside the Church and who is poor.

This comes through in today's Gospel lesson. This is that wonderfully imaginative parable of the Last Judgment, with the King separating the sheep from the goats. Notice how the King judges: "Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was in prison and you came to me'."

That also is what it means to stay awake and to avoid falling asleep in peace and security: to cross the way that separates you from the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, and the imprisoned. As a Christian people we are responsive to our poor neighbors, wherever they may be. In that sense we are awake, too, just as we are awake in the context of the Christian community itself.

-3-

This means, among other things, that the torn life of the Vietnamese peasant and the equally torn life of many troops on all sides in that war should haunt us, haunt us until we find some way to alleviate the misery of those people. And maybe the time is now. Maybe the only way to be our brother's keeper in this case is to begin. Even perhaps if we have to be unruly and show a lack of what many consider good taste. Maybe the time for just observing our brother's desperation is over. Maybe our situation, too, is urgent.

The same goes for the security of our physical well-being. Maybe the time is here politically to risk a shift in the staus quo of the world for the sake of the hungry and the thirsty. Even though that change may disturb or threaten our own physical security. Maybe the time has come to do more than picket for lower prices in our supermarkets. Perhaps the time is here to work for supermarkets in Latin American and Asia.

Likewise for our academic distance. Perhaps we should forget once and for all the academic distance of the cultural relativists who refused to condemn Nazism, and consider the academic distance of a group like the Society For Social Resonsibility in Science, a group which, for example, has recently issued a stern warning about the development of biological warfare.

"When people say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. ...So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober."

And behind all this there's a firm reason for our vigilance. The God we confess, however faltering our confession may sometimes be, is himself one who is awake. As the Psalmist says, "he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."(Ps. 121:5f.) That is the Lord, who in his universal providence is working his will for brotherhood, on earth as it is in heaven, -- working through us when we are awake, working apart from us when we slumber. That is the Lord, who himself builds up the Church and who himself ministers to the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger and the imprisoned, in the world -- long before we first begin to rub our tired eyes in the morning. We are awake, when we are, because he is always awake.

"Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." "So then let us not sleep..., but let us keep awake and be sober."