

A Lion on a Watchtower

A sermon about the signs of the times

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, January 7, 2024

“A lion upon a watchtower cried out: ‘Oh Lord, I stand continually in the daytime; I have sat at my post every night. And look, here comes a chariot of men with a pair of horsemen!’” Isaiah 21:8,9

The lion sees good things coming. The chariot he sees is accompanied by horsemen and has a man in it who is declaring that Babylon is fallen. This is good news. The message is that all will be well.

But this isn't all that this prophecy tells us. There is both good news and bad, and the balance between them may help us think about what to expect in this new year.

According to our reading from the Arcana Coelestia, a watchman stands for “one who observes the states of the church and its changes” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10134). In a sense every person is a watchman. We observe the changes in our world, we assess their meaning, we make decisions, and act in response to what we see. To “observe the state of the church” is to notice spiritual things – to assess the kindness, the caring, the truth, the wisdom, and the desire and efforts for useful service that we see around us and in ourselves. Do we love the Lord? Are we obedient to His will? These are the questions that the spiritual watchman is looking to answer.

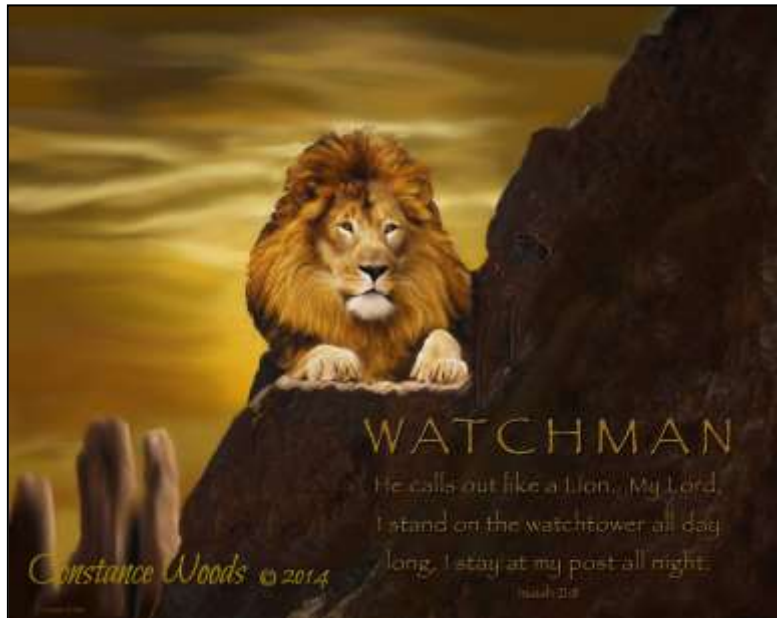
The Lord has told us to watch for His coming. In Matthew He says:

“Watch, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.” Matthew 24:42

In Mark, He says:

“Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is...³⁵ Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the

rooster, or in the morning—³⁶ lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping.³⁷ And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” Mark 13:33-37



So everyone is a watchman. We are observers of our spiritual environment and its changes. We are warned not to sleep when we should be watching. In a statement that He makes to the Pharisees He also warns us to understand carefully what we see:

“You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times.” Matthew 16:3

Jesus was telling them that although they were astute observers of their external world and its circumstances, they did not understand what was really happening around them. It is important to know what is happening.

The curious prophecy in our reading from Isaiah describes what we might see if we could look at the world with a prophet's eyes. The descriptions of chariots pulled by donkeys and camels, a lion on a watchtower, and a watchman who sees the morning coming, are among the hundreds of prophetic statements found in the Old Testament.

Our topic this morning is the meaning of Isaiah's vision. He describes the spiritual state of the world as it anticipates the Lord's birth. Written seven hundred years before the event, it speaks of the darkness and spiritual winter of the time, and of the hope for the coming of the light. Almost three thousand years later His words are still current.

The section that we read involves two prophecies: one directed at the Wilderness of the Sea (supposed to have been a desert near Babylon), and the other at Dumah, an area of Edom. *“The burden against the Wilderness of the Sea: As whirlwinds in the South pass through, so it comes from the desert, from a terrible land. ² A distressing vision is declared to me; the treacherous dealer deals treacherously, and the plunderer plunders.”* Isaiah 21:1,2

The Lord was born on earth to save a troubled world. *“It is a universal principle of faith that He came to remove hell from mankind”* (True Christian Religion 2). Isaiah’s “distressing vision” describes the trouble as “treachery” and “plundering.” In response he is told to set a watchman:

“For thus has the Lord said to me: “Go, set a watchman, Let him declare what he sees”⁷ And he saw a chariot with a pair of horsemen, a chariot of donkeys, and a chariot of camels.” Isaiah 21:6,7

The watchman looks out from the tower and what he sees are chariots pulled by animals that we often associate with Christmas. We picture Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt with a donkey, and the Magi arriving on camels. Neither of these are actually stated in the Gospels, but the prophets do predict that kings would come with camels (Isaiah 60:6) and that the Savior would ride on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Camels and donkeys stand for knowledge, but knowledge can be used to support either good or evil. Here, according to the *Arcana Coelestia*, they stand for *“the hollowness of knowledge that serves no use...the hollow reasonings found with people meant by Babel”* (*Arcana Coelestia* 3048).

The “Babel” mentioned here is “Babylon” a city associated with the height of evil. The chariots pulled by camels and donkeys portray its wickedness as knowledge that is hollow and is not the true answer to the real issues. This shouldn’t be surprising because the origin of all evil is described in the Genesis story as the seduction of Adam and

Eve by the serpent into eating the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. We read:

“In ancient times, people who put more trust in what they learned through their senses than in what had been revealed were called snakes. The situation now is even worse, since some people not only believe nothing except what they can see and touch but also use facts unknown to the ancients to confirm their point of view. The result is that they

blind themselves far more profoundly.” *Secrets of Heaven* 196

There is no question that knowledge is powerful, both for good and evil. The skepticism and materialism of our age is fueled by the enormous advances in knowledge over the past few centuries. We naturally look for the solution to the world’s problems in science, technology and political action. But even though all of these are necessary and are part of

any solution, they are hollow without the deeper knowledges of Divine Revelation. This knowledge is described in the next part of the prophecy:

“And he listened earnestly with great care. ⁸ A lion upon a watchtower cried out “Oh Lord, I stand continually in the daytime; I have sat at my post every night. ⁹ And look, here comes a chariot of men with a pair of horsemen!” Isaiah 21:8,9

Camels, donkeys, and now a lion on a watchtower! The lion speaks and reports what it sees, and, according to the *Apocalypse Explained*, the news is good. The lion, here, tirelessly at his post, stands for the Lord Himself, constantly watching over the human race. What He sees and announces is another chariot, this time a “chariot of men” – apparently a chariot with a man in it. The man seems to be the Lord in His coming, because we are told that *“this treats of the coming of the Lord and a new church at that time...A “chariot” and a “pair of horsemen” stand for the doctrine of truth from the Word”* (*Apocalypse Explained* 278.6).

The turning point is the watchman’s listening - *“he listened earnestly with great care.”* The sense of the



Hebrew is conveyed by the older translation “*he harkened a harkening*” which has the implication of obedience, and stands for “*a life according to that doctrine*” meant by the man in the chariot (*ibid.*).

The purpose of the Lord’s coming is that by being born on earth He will be known, understood, and obeyed, and that this will “*remove hell from mankind*” and bring peace on earth. The light that He brings is the knowledge that will in time overcome the knowledge that only breeds materialism and skepticism. This is what our recitation is referring to when it says:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” Your watchmen shall lift up their voices, with their voices they shall sing together; for they shall see eye to eye when the Lord brings back Zion.” Isaiah 52:8,9

He proclaims salvation. It follows that Isaiah ends the prophecy with a statement of victory and hope:

“Then he answered and said, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen! And all the carved images of her gods He has broken to the ground. ¹⁰ Oh, my threshing and the grain of my floor!” Isaiah 21:9,10

Babylon is overcome by the One in the chariot, the “*Dayspring from on high,*” our Lord and Savior.

Isaiah speaks again:

“The burden against Dumah. He calls to me out of Seir, “Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?” ¹² The watchman said, “The morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; Return! Come back!” Isaiah 21:11,12

In a sense this is a summary of the previous prophecy. The watchman is there, it is night and he is waiting for the morning. Seir is mentioned in other prophecies of the Lord’s birth, such as Balaam’s words:

“A star shall arise out of Jacob, and scepter shall rise out of Israel...and Edom shall be a possession; Seir also shall be an inheritance.” Numbers 24:17,18

The theme is the same. The star that lightens the darkness is the same light and the same victory that brings on the morning. Seir especially stands for the fact that the Lord brought the truth right down to

our level, expressed in understandable terms so that we can know and obey Him (*Arcana Coelestia* 4240).

But why does he say: “*The morning comes, and also the night*”? According to our lesson this “*means that even though enlightenment comes to those who belong to the new church, night remains with those who are in the old one*” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10134). The Lord comes in the night to begin a new day. He comes at a time of spiritual darkness to teach and enlighten everyone who will hear Him, beginning a new Church. But not everyone hears. For them the night continues. The last words, “*If you will inquire, inquire; Return! Come back!*” urge us to look into these things, to consider our ways and “return” or repent.

This is why the Lord tells us to understand the “*signs of the times.*” This is why He tells us to “*watch.*” We are to notice the spiritual state of our world. Notice the kindness, the caring, the truth, the wisdom, and the desire and efforts for useful service that we see around us and within us.

As we look forward into this coming year our minds are brought back again and again to the many issues that face us, whether in the world around us or in our personal lives. Too often we see the solutions only in terms of political action, finances, or other natural remedies. These are important and necessary, but they are also like the chariots pulled by camels and donkeys. They don’t get to real truth. This truth is only seen as we hear, obey and practice what the Lord teaches, and hear the words of the one in the chariot pulled by horses – that Babylon is fallen, that evil has been overcome.

The messianic prophecies of Isaiah are the most beautiful and the most often repeated of all: “*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*” (*Isaiah* 9). The prophecy of the watchman is not so well known, with its chariots of camels and donkeys, the lion on the watchtower, and the coming of the morning. But its message is clear: watch for the morning light, hear and obey the Lord’s truth. Each of us has a role to play in the coming of that morning, as the knowledge of His truth spreads around the world. We need to pay attention to what is happening, and *hearken* to the Lord’s message.

He calls to me out of Seir, “Watchman, tell us of the night? Watchman, tell us of the night?” The watchman said, “The morning comes, and also the night.” Isaiah 21:11,12 AMEN

Readings from the Word

Isaiah 21:

The burden against the Wilderness of the Sea.

As whirlwinds in the South pass through, so it comes from the desert, from a terrible land.

² A distressing vision is declared to me; the treacherous dealer deals treacherously, and the plunderer plunders.

⁶ For thus has the Lord said to me: “Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he sees.”

⁷ And he saw a chariot with a pair of horsemen, a chariot of donkeys, and a chariot of camels,

And he listened earnestly with great care. ⁸ A lion upon a watchtower cried out:

“Oh Lord, I stand continually in the daytime; I have sat at my post every night.

⁹ And look, here comes a chariot of men with a pair of horsemen!”

Then he answered and said, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen!

And all the carved images of her gods He has broken to the ground.”

¹⁰ Oh, my threshing and the grain of my floor!

That which I have heard from the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, I have declared to you.

¹¹ **The burden against Dumah.** He calls to me out of Seir, “Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?” ¹² The watchman said, “The morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; Return! Come back!”

Arcana Coelestia 10134:

The watchman' is used to mean in the internal sense one who observes the states of the Church and the changes it undergoes, and so to mean every prophet. 'The night' is used to mean the final state of the church, 'morning' its first state. 'Seir' from where the watchman calls means the enlightenment of nations who are in darkness. 'Morning comes, and also the night' means that even though enlightenment comes to those who belong to the new church, night remains with those who are in the old one.

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It is not granted to a person to foreknow events, that he may be able to act in freedom in

accordance with his reason. For as people know, whatever a person loves, he wishes to bring into effect, and he guides himself to it by means of his reason. People know, too, that everything a person considers with his reason springs from a love for it to come through his thought into effect. Consequently, if in consequence of some Divine prediction he were to know the end result or outcome, his reason would surrender, and with reason his love. For love comes to rest with reason in the effect, and from it then begins anew.

Reason's essential delight is to envision from love the effect in thought - not at the time of the effect, but prior to it, or not at the present time, but in a time to come. It is this that gives a person what we call hope, which grows or dwindles in his reason as it envisions or anticipates the outcome. This delight is fulfilled in the outcome, but afterward erased, along with thought about it. The same would be the case with any outcome foreknown.



“Watchman, what of the night?” —/Isa. xxi. 11.

