

All Along the Watchtower

Isaiah 21: 6-12; 52: 7-9

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Christmas Eve, AD 2023
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As we sit in the deep dark of December, we wonder what 2024 will bring. Will the winter turn toward spring? Will the light really grow stronger with the new year? We peer into the unknown and wonder if there is good news for us. More than 700 years before Christ was born, the LORD spoke to the prophet Isaiah. “Go, set a watchman,” he said. “Let him announce what he sees.” The picture is of a man on the ramparts. He looks over the walls of the city and strains to see into the dark what may be coming. Suddenly he announces two riders approaching.



This Bible passage inspired Bob Dylan’s 1967 song “All Along the Watchtower.” The song became a rock classic when Jimi Hendrix recorded it. Hendrix added his soaring, haunting electric guitar and a half century later it still thrills. Curiously, this is a song that ends with the start of a story. You’re left wanting more. You just want to know what

happens next. The final verse says

All along the watchtower,
Princes kept the view...
Outside in the cold distance
A wildcat did growl.
Two riders were approaching
And the wind begin to howl....

Right. I hear the wind. I see far off two riders approaching. Something is about to happen. Something looked for yet unexpected. Something unsettling, thrilling, hopeful. Something that means change. What is it? “Watchman, tell us of the night! What do you see?”

In the last thousand days, we have passed through a pandemic, racial strife, polarization, terrorism, crises of faith, and wars that threaten to engulf the world. Dawn seems far off. And the truth is, most of us alive now have not lived through

times as weird and tough as these. We've been so blessed with relative peace in our lifetimes that we do not know if we can get through these tensions. Yet this is not as bad as the world has been, not nearly as bad. So for perspective, tonight I wanted to take us back to 1940. To hear news from a Christian watchman. He's near enough to us, having lived in the 20th century. But removed enough to have seen firsthand the devastation of a world gone mad with war, and still come out with hope.



Young Torrance. In 1939, a young Scottish academic turned down a teaching post at Princeton University. Thomas Torrance returned to Scotland from America because he knew war was coming. He volunteered to serve his country as a chaplain to the troops. There were many volunteers at the start of WW2, and Torrance was put on a waiting list for service. So Torrance finished his ordination requirements. Early in 1940 he became the pastor of the small Alyth church in central Scotland. On Dec. 22 of that year, the 27 year old rookie pastor stood up to give Christmas hope in a Britain crushed by Hitler's war with faint prospects for surviving the Nazi onslaught.



Nazi's in Paris. Think for a moment of what had already happened in 1940. In *July* the Nazis captured Paris. Those terrible jackboots trampled down the beautiful Champ de Elysees. The darkness of the Reich flooded through the City of Light.



Battle Over Britain. In *August*, Hitler turned his attention to Great Britain. He began an air and naval assault meant to open the way for a ground invasion of England. Just four months before Torrance's Christmas service, a vastly out-manned Royal Air Force had bravely held the skies day after day against the Luftwaffe, the most powerful air power in history.



The Blitz. In *September*, 1940 London endured the Blitz. The steady nighttime pounding from 300 German bombers was meant to create terror and chaos. Night after night when the air raid sirens wailed, Londoners huddled in the tunnels of the tube stations. Miraculously, the British resolve to carry on caused Hitler to change tactics away from a direct invasion.



Coventry. But the air raids continued. In *November*, just six weeks before Torrance's sermon, the nation saw the pictures of beautiful Coventry cathedral in ruins. Though Britain had miraculously survived 1940, as the year closed, the future still looked bleak.

This is the context in which the young Torrance stood up to give his first Christmas sermon. For his Scripture, Torrance asked along with Isaiah, the urgent question of a nation in dire straits. "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?" Is there any hope? Then he answered with another passage from Isaiah (52: 7-8). A prophecy of the LORD's future for his people:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings glad tidings...,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice;
together they sing for joy;
for eye to eye they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.

The news came at the dark of year, in the bleak midwinter of a war that very well might be lost. The watchman, who was this young Scottish preacher, brought news as important in 1940 as it was when Isaiah wrote in the 8th century BC. As it is today. Tidings of peace. Light in the darkness. Salvation. Your God is arriving! Your God still reigns.

The little congregation beleaguered by war, deprivation and terror could certainly see the connections with broken, exiled Israel as Torrance preached. Listen how he weaves a line of faith into all his examples. Listen how he urges them to “*Go to Bethlehem.*”

Suddenly through the darkness, the flame of the beacon leaps up the sky; and the watchman on the battlements cries aloud: ‘Break forth into joy, sing for the LORD has comforted his people.’

That was what happened to Isaiah. A sudden glimpse was given of the daybreak of Israel’s hope: “Unto us a child is born, a Son is given.” “Your God reigns!” And there is nothing that you and I need more than that today. *Go to Bethlehem*, and behold your King!

Here is a world that has gone stark mad with promethean force, and lust and power. Here is a world when as never before the gigantic forces of nature are harnessed to the chariot-wheels of war until nations are smoking ruins and the world reeks with the stench of blood—and the biggest wound of all is left in the soul of man himself. What power is there that can ever bring sanity and healing to such a terrible world? *Go to Bethlehem*, and crouch in wonder at the crib of an innocent babe, and you will find that all the titanic might within the heart and mind of fallen man will be tamed, and he too will become a little child.

And here is a man whose life has become impure and sordid, who has created foul things in his soul; and the wreck of his wasted humanity is haunted by ghosts of evil deeds, and hollow with the mocking laughter of sin’s remorseless guilt. What power in heaven or earth can make anything of that? *Go to Bethlehem*, there is a power wrapped in swaddling clothes, but whose name is called Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins!

And here is someone who is distracted with the cares of this world. Her very soul has become corroded with the dripping bitterness of thwarted desires; all her hopes are misshapen; and the canker has burrowed into her heart. Is there any salvation for such as she? *Go to Bethlehem*; listen to the song of the angels which tell us that the helpless whimper of a babe is the voice of the living God, and such wonder and awe will seize that woman’s soul that the rough places will be made smooth and the crooked places straight.

My dear friends, that is the way of God, He has *stooped* to conquer! That is God upon the earth, in all like unto the humblest by the power of His omnipotent love. Was there ever a more amazing revelation of power than there, there where you see the Mighty God as a tiny babe? *Go to Bethlehem*. This is how your God reigns!¹



In 1943, Torrance would get his call to serve. He ministered the hope of this gospel on the frontlines of the battles in Italy. He held dying men in his arms and told them about the Jesus who loved them and forgave them and would welcome them home. Even as bullets zipped past his head, Torrance discovered that the news of the watchman held true. Watchman, what of the night? All along the watchtower, we strain

our eyes into the future. When things seem hopeless, the midnight sky lights up with angels.

Once the prophet had spoken to a people soon to be in exile, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” On Christmas, the angels proclaimed the glory of God to be found in the straw of a manger. “Fear not, behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which say be unto all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of a David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

This Christmas, perhaps you are called to give up your despair that evil seems to have the upper hand. Perhaps you are called to give up your anger that the world is not how it should be. Perhaps you are called to give up your cynicism about the truth of the gospel. Perhaps you are called to give up trying to make the world suit you. Perhaps you are called to surrender yourself to the news from the watchtower. The LORD God has shown his mighty power by coming to us as the baby in a feeding trough. He stoops to conquer. He gives away his power in order to set us free. He dies to bring life. He will come again to set all things right. Things in this world may get worse. But things in this world do not have the final say. The news along the watchtower holds true. Our God has come to us. This child is King of kings and prince of peace. This child is God. *Go to Bethlehem*. Your God reigns, and you are his.

¹ Sermon excerpts from The Thomas F. Torrance Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, Box 43, “Sermon on Isaiah 52.7: Christmas Sermon” (Alyth: December 22, 1940), 1–9.