



The Trinity Pulpit



The Last Lecture Mark 13:24-37 Dr. Jeff Roberts November 30, 2008

Keep awake.

That's one way to summarize the last lecture of Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Pausch delivered his final lecture in September 2007, after he had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. He showed a love of life and an approach to death that many people have found inspiring, and his lecture has turned into a phenomenon, viewed by millions on television and on the Internet. He went on to write a best-selling book with columnist Jeffrey Zaslow titled The Last Lecture, a book about love, courage and saying goodbye.

On Friday, July 25, 2008, Pausch succumbed to cancer at the age of 47.

He expected maybe 150 people to attend his last lecture. After all, it was a warm September day, and he assumed that people would have better things to do than attend a final lesson from a dying computer science professor in his 40s. He bet a friend \$50 that he would never fill the 400-seat auditorium.

Well, Pausch lost that bet. The room was packed, and when he arrived on stage, he received a standing ovation. He motioned the audience of students and colleagues to sit down. "Make me earn it," he said.

According to columnist Zaslow of The Wall Street Journal (May 3, 2008, and September 20, 2007), Randy hardly mentioned his cancer in the course of his 70-minute lecture. Instead, he took everyone on a rollicking and riveting journey through the lessons of his life. He talked about the importance of childhood dreams, and the stamina needed to overcome obstacles. "Brick walls are there for a reason," he insisted, showing slides of the rejection letters he had received over the years. "They let us prove how badly we want things."

He pushed his audience to show patience toward others, saying, "Wait long enough, and people will surprise and impress you." He celebrated his mentors and his students with an open heart, and revealed the depth of his love for his family.

Giving a nod to his techie background, Randy showed good humor. "I've experienced a deathbed conversion," he said with a smile. "I just bought a Macintosh." And wanting to show the crowd that he wasn't ready to kick the bucket, he dropped to the floor and did one-handed push-ups.

Keep awake. That's what Randy seemed to be saying as he invited his audience to rethink their ambitions and find new ways to look at other people's flaws and abilities. Keep awake to what is truly important in life. After showing pictures of his childhood bedroom, marked up with mathematical notations he had drawn on the walls, he said, "If your kids want to paint their bedrooms, as a favor to me, let 'em do it."

Keep awake to what really matters. In this case it's children — not bedroom walls.

After the lecture, Randy's only plan was to spend his remaining days with his family. But a video of his talk began to spread like a virus across the Web. Randy was soon receiving e-mails from people around the world, telling him that his lecture had inspired them to spend more time with loved ones, quit pitying themselves, and even resist suicidal urges. Terminally ill people were inspired to embrace their own goodbyes, and have fun with every day they had left.

His last lecture really woke people up.

Then Randy gave part of his talk on The Oprah Winfrey Show, and ABC News named him one of its three "Persons of the

Year.” People urged him to write a book, which he resisted at first, since he wanted to spend time with his family. But since he needed to exercise, and had to be alone as he rode his bike, he began to use his daily rides as a time to reflect on his lecture, his life and his dreams for his family.

And so, for an hour each day, he would talk to columnist Zaslow through a cell-phone headset, and over the course of 53 long bike rides he shared the insights that became the book called *The Last Lecture*.¹

Keep awake. That’s what Randy Pausch says to us, and what Jesus says as well.

It is not too much of a stretch to look at the words of Jesus in Mark 13 as Jesus’ last lecture. Throughout this chapter he was reminding his disciples of what is truly important. He reminded them not to be fooled by false prophets. He told them that things would not always be easy. He foretold there would be moments when they would be challenged and betrayed, some would even die for the cause of Christ. However, instead of falling into despair in such moments they were to remember that this is the plan of God and that just when things are at their worst Jesus will return. It will be an earth-shaking event and those who stand firm to the end will be saved. Then Jesus gave them instructions about how they were to live as they waited for his second coming and remained committed to him until the end.

If Randy Pausch’s last words are “wake up” or “stay awake”, then Jesus’ last lecture has these three points: be alert, faithful, and on guard. These are important words for us to live by. These are the instructions of Jesus as we wait for his second coming. We are not instructed to spend our time predicting his coming since no one knows the time. In fact such an exercise, which seems to become an obsession to so many Christians, is useless. Instead, Jesus told us to be alert, faithful and watchful. These are not only good instructions for us as we await Jesus’ second coming, but let me suggest to us today, as we begin the Advent season, that these are good words for us as we celebrate Jesus’ first coming.

As we prepare for Christmas, it seems to me that Advent should be a season of being alert, faithful and watchful. How can we practice this last lecture of Jesus during this Advent season?

First, let us remain alert. Here, the word “alert” has the connotation of “being perceptive or insightful – the quality of discerning the moment.” Throughout this passage, Jesus is calling his disciples not to be overwhelmed by difficult moments, whether personal or cultural, but to discern the moments as God’s activity. I think that becoming alert during Advent is important, if we are going to truly celebrate the birth of Christ: it is so easy to get lulled to sleep by the season. Our busyness – going from one party to another, wrapping gifts, going shopping, attending special services at church, all the while trying to do our normal activities – can leave a person frazzled and bleary eyed. We wake up somewhere around December 26 or 27 and realize Christmas has come and gone, and we never really spent any time reflecting on the meaning of God’s gift through Christ.

What we need is discernment – we need to stay alert.

We need to be alert to those around us. This, of course, is one of those times of year when people we love find themselves depressed and sorrowful. There are many who spend the season weeping rather than filled with joy. We need to be sensitive to our co-workers, family members, and friends and stay alert that we might be able to care for those who are hurting this season.

We also need to be alert to the voice of God. Through all of the canned music in the malls, the “ho, ho, ho’s” and the “Merry Christmas’s”, we need to listen for the still, soft voice of God. We need to be spending time in prayer, reflection, and worship so that we might not miss the celebration of God’s indescribable gift: his son Jesus Christ.

On Black Friday, several tragedies happened across our nation. In one Wal-Mart store the herd of people trampled a 34-year old worker; others were hurt as they tried to go upstream against the frenzied shoppers to help the man. In another store a man was shot, as two men became involved in a fight, following a fight in the store between their wives. When we hear stories like this we shake our heads and say “What have we become?” How has America turned this day of peace, love, and grace from God into a commercial-frenzied, economy-saving, self-centered season? What we, as Christians, desperately need in these moments is to be alert – to be able to discern what is true and what is real, when it comes to Christmas – that we might not be swept away by the season, but that this Advent might become a time of deep and meaningful worship for us.



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Another word that we need to consider is faithfulness. Jesus tells us something interesting regarding his disciples for when he returns: we must be alert and on guard. “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mark 13:32) So we must be alert, because we do not know when he will return. If a man goes away and leaves his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, he tells the one at the door “Keep watch.” “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back . . . If he comes back suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.” (Mark 13:35-36)

What is Jesus saying? He is telling his disciples to be found faithful until he returns. There is a tendency in us all to grow tired of doing good. We begin to rationalize that what we do does not really matter. We think, “We cannot truly make a difference so why even try?” We get frustrated with our own culture and say “If you can’t beat them you might as well join them.” The problem is that we do not know when Jesus will return so we must be faithful till the end.

How can we define faithfulness? Faithfulness is a character issue. The faithful employee is the one who works when they are being watched and when they are not being watched. The faithful spouse is the one committed to his or her spouse in situations where no one would know the difference. The faithful child is the one who cares for the parent who will never know someone is taking care of them. The faithful friend is the one who comes running when no one else cares. The faithful church member is the one who attends to their assigned task whether they are noticed or praised by others.

Faithfulness is a character trait which Jesus expects from his followers. Why is faithfulness a quality of the Christian? It is one of the character traits of God. God is faithful even when we are unfaithful. God’s character does not depend on the response of his children or the circumstances. As revealed by the Bible, God is a picture of faithfulness. This season upon which we are embarking is the reminder of God’s faithfulness to his creation. Even when we had sinned, God did not give up but promised us a Messiah and a Savior, and Advent is the great, yearly reminder of God’s faithful gift in Christ.

We need faithfulness during the Advent season. As we faithfully wait for Jesus’ second coming, we celebrate his first. This Advent season we are called to be faithful to our assigned tasks. Some of us will

work tirelessly behind the scenes to prepare worship experiences for others; some will decorate the church and others will never know of your work, but it will be essential in others’ worship experience; some of you will teach a class when everyone else is out of town. Yet, your presence will create a learning experience for children, youth, and adults. A few of you will go caroling to our homebound friends – it usually is a small group. As you stand in the cold and sing carols, you might wonder if it is really worth your time. I can tell you, for that homebound member, it is a moment they anticipate all year long. Whatever your task is, whether it is at work, church, or at home, don’t let the change in schedule and the busyness of the season keep you from being faithful.

As he battled pancreatic cancer, Randy Pausch knew about the importance of using time wisely. “At this point,” he said, “I’m an authority on what to do with limited time.” According to *Newsweek*, he had hooked three monitors to his PC, in order to maximize his electronic workspace. He put uncomfortable chairs in his office to keep visitors from lingering. And he stood up while talking on the phone, as an incentive to finish calls quickly. Even as he was dying, Randy remained faithful to his tasks.²

A last word in our text is the word “watch.” Sometimes the word is translated “be on guard.” I think watching is different than staying alert: staying alert has something to do with discernment, while watching has to do with being prepared. The question in the text is whether the servants will be prepared no matter when the Lord returns. This is why Jesus says “watch – be prepared.”

There really is no substitute for preparation. This is true at school: the student who is hoping prayer will make a difference when it comes to taking a test needs to learn that what matters is preparation. At work being prepared is of utmost importance; it is sometimes painful to watch someone trying to do something for which it is obvious they are unprepared.

Jesus wanted us to be prepared for his coming: we are not to be surprised. So, by being faithful and discerning we prepare ourselves for his coming, whenever it might occur.

Let me urge you to prepare for Advent. Being on watch or being prepared will make all the difference in our celebration this year. We can discern God’s voice in the noise of the season, and still remain



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faithful to our tasks, though our schedules will be busy. What we need the most is preparation – we need to spend some time in prayer, worship and reflection, so our hearts can find a place this year for the celebration of Christmas.

A few years ago, one of America's biggest department stores tried marketing a doll in the form of the baby Jesus. The advertisements described it as being "washable, cuddly and unbreakable," and it was neatly packaged in straw, satin and plastic. To complete the package, the manufacturer added biblical texts appropriate to the baby Jesus. To the department store executives, it looked like a sure-fire winner, a real money-maker. They were wrong – it didn't sell. In a last-ditch effort to get rid of the dolls, one of the store managers placed a huge sign in a prominent display window. It read:

*Jesus Christ
Marked down 50%
Get him while you can*

Christmas will surely come and go. If we don't prepare ourselves these next few weeks for this wonderful cele-

bration, we might miss it again. We might miss God breaking through all of our festive plans and busyness to remind us once again that Jesus came and Jesus is coming again.

Randy Pausch's last lecture has inspired many, but these words of Jesus will make the difference in this life and the life to come. They are words of preparation for not only Jesus' second coming but also for celebrating his first coming. Be alert and learn to discern God's voice in your life. Be faithful no matter the season. Watch! Prepare for Jesus coming whether it is his second or the celebration of his first.

Christmas is coming and as Fredrick Buechner writes "Year after year, the ancient tale of what happened is told – raw, preposterous, holy – and year after year the world in some measure stoops to listen."³ You have heard the story before; will you listen for God's voice, be faithful, and prepare your heart for Christmas this Advent? Will you stoop and listen one more time? ♦

¹*Homiletics*, November-December, 2008, Vol. 20, Number 6, pp. 41-42.

²*Newsweek*, May 26, 2008.

³Fredrick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 61.

