

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

The Invention that Could Run the World

Isaiah 2.1-5; Matthew 24.36-44

Russ Dean, November 30, 2008



Five hundred years before Jesus lived, Greeks in the ancient city of Sybaris developed a system of patents. I suppose it could be said that the Greeks patented the patent! Their original idea protected inventors: “the profits arising from [any creation of their making]... for the space of a year.” After the Italians and the English got into the act, beginning in the fifteenth century, colonist in a new America began adopting state-wide systems for patenting new inventions, until, in 1790, the Congress of the United States adopted a Patent Act, and issued the first American patent to Samuel Hopkins of Vermont.

Since Mr. Hopkins developed that new technique for producing potash, the U.S. Patent and Trade Mark office, now located in Alexandria, VA, has issued nearly eight million patents, including a 1999 patent for the “sealed, crustless sandwich” – you know, moms, for all those times you have cut the crust off two slices of bread, and pinched the edges of that peanut butter and jelly together with your fingers... you could have had the patent for that, yourself! In 2002 the office issued a patent to a seven year-old boy for a method for swinging a swing. (I do hope he’s not collecting royalty checks from playgrounds across the country for that invention!)

Human beings have always been inventors, or, as these ridiculous examples show, have always wanted to see their name in lights... or, at the very least, recorded in the lowest bowels of the Patents Office, buried in some ubiquitous filing cabinet, under the label, “Patent # eight-million... and-one.” I began this little rabbit chasing exercise, trying to find the often told story of the Commissioner of Patents, Mr. Charles Duell, who held that office during the tenure of President William McKinley. It has been reported that in 1899 Mr. Duell made a request to

President McKinley to close the patents office, because “everything that could be invented has been invented.” The story is so widely told that even President Reagan once used it in a speech, but according to my research, the story is, thankfully, apocryphal. Mr. Duell actually had quite a positive attitude about the future of inventing in this country,¹ and more than a hundred years later, obviously, everything that could be invented has still not been invented... though some things that should not have been invented, have been... (I do hope you're curious!)

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of mountains... and all the nations shall stream to it...

This is our journey. It is not just an Advent journey – it is the destination to which we are called. That mountain of truth and justice which *shall be raised above the hills...* It is a mountain of peace. Though the prophet Joel would say it just the other way around (*they shall beat their plowshares into swords*, Joel 3.10), the Prophet Isaiah sees the mountain of our destiny as a place of peace: swords of war shall become implements for providing a harvest which all can enjoy. And he urges his people onward and upward: *Come... let us walk in the light of the LORD!* This is our journey!

But when... when will we awaken to this journey that holds more promise for the human race than perhaps any other? When will we awaken to it? For all the progress we have made, it seems that in many ways we are yet to “wake up and smell the coffee” of peace! As has often been repeated, the last century of our human journey has been the bloodiest of all. In a September service commemorating the International Day of Prayer for Peace, we recounted the countless millions who died in the ravages of war in the last hundred years, and the litany was almost too much for your staff just to recite. Millions upon millions upon millions...

¹ <http://ask.yahoo.com/20050407.html>

When will we wake up?

We will not, I think, as long as we view Isaiah's prophecy, and other words of peace in our scripture, only in apocalyptic terms. Perhaps it is because Christians fear we cannot achieve the peace of Isaiah's call. Or perhaps, and I think this is more likely the case, we simply are unwilling to wage the effort that such a peace will require. Peace, too, must be waged! But whatever the reason, the most popular way to understand Isaiah's peace is to understand it apocalyptically – that is, as something that will happen at the end of time, and not until then. To believe that peace is something only God can bring. Finally. Cataclysmically. When it's all said and done. But Isaiah's call was not a wake up call for God... it was for you. And me. Wake up to the journey to peace!

In 1982 he led his Georgia Bulldogs to a national football championship, finishing a three-year run amassing 5,097 yards gained, and edging out John Elway for the coveted Heisman Trophy. (I guess Georgia could have used Hershel Walker yesterday, couldn't they have, Jonathan!?)² Walker was an amazing athlete to watch. An amazing human physical specimen. I heard an interview with him sometime during that year, my senior year in high school, and was amazed to learn that despite his incredible physique, Herschel Walker never lifted weights. For many years he had followed a daily regimen of push-ups and sit-ups, all sorts of body calisthenics. He knew his own body well enough to know his own need for conditioning. Apparently coaches had chafed at his unwillingness to report to the weight room – until he proved his strength for them in a one-time weight room test. After that, they were satisfied to leave him to his own devices.

² On Saturday Georgia lost to Georgia Tech, 42-45.

And, in that same interview I heard Herschel Walker say that he didn't own an alarm clock. When the surprised interviewer asked how he got himself up at the appropriate time, he just indicated that he told his body when he needed to wake up, and he did. Nine o'clock: got it. Seven a.m.: no problem. Five, for an early workout: let's go! Just as he knew the strength of his body, he had an uncanny awareness of himself in his surroundings. When it was time to wake up. He did.³

I'm told that you can now buy an alarm clock for your bedside table. I guess it's a kind of anti-Hershel-Walker clock. It alarms at the bedside and then knocks itself on the floor where it proceeds to run itself around the bedroom, beeping and squawking, until some bleary-eyed victim traps it in the corner and stomps it into silent submission!

When the disciples of Jesus wanted to know what time they had to be awake... when the end was coming (as if the meantime wasn't important – which I think is what they really were saying), Jesus refused to give them a time. It seems preachers will never get tired of trying to scare people into faith with apocalyptic fears. “Signs of the times,” they call it. Well, they were preaching that useless gospel to Jesus' disciples, and you can still hear it every day of the week – just set your alarm clock for your favorite radio evangelist. But Jesus refused to play. Ironically, his words have been used by apocalyptic preachers of every age, most recently Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, who authored the multi-million best-selling “Left Behind” series. But all Jesus would say to those who asked... all we need to know Jesus said is... wake up.

People of God... it's time to wake up. You snooze... you lose. You see Christ is coming. As we prepare to tell again that greatest story every told, of the coming of a God, who would

³ I don't recall the exact interview, but after the service, my memories were confirmed by several people who had learned the same information about Walker – and one who added that on top of the information I had shared, Walker had been the valedictorian of his high school class!

come wrapped in the weakness and innocence of human frailty, the Christ beckons, in the words of the beloved Christmas carol, to “be born in us, today.” Just as there was a first coming, there are second comings... many of them. Every time someone awakens to the peace and promise and hope of a God of weakness and innocence, Christ has been born, anew, into this world. People of God... it’s time to wake up. You snooze... you lose.

Yes... the Invention that Could Ruin the World is a simple little mechanism. Like many other devious devices, it cloaks itself in the best of intentions. [click] It’s just nine more minutes. [click] Nine more minutes. What harm could that do? [click] “Snooze it one more time (my wife tells me every morning!)... we’ve still got time...” [click]

Like old Rip Van Winkle who slept through twenty years of change, far too many folks walk through time, in a kind of hit-the-snooze-one-more-time stupor. Not aware. They are looking for God. Hoping for God. Holding out for some “miracle.” Or, turning their back on the God whom Woody Allen once mocked as an “underachiever.”⁴ Maybe worst of all... they’re snoozing, longing to get back to some good ‘ole days -- that never existed. (Not even in the good ‘ole days!)

You know... the world is changing. Or have you been... snoozing? It’s not the ‘50s anymore. And it never will be. It’s not even the ‘90s! The United States of America just elected an African American man to the highest office in the land. A flood of immigrants are again changing the face of a country of immigrants. The internet has revolutionized the way we say hello, and to whom. The world is getting smaller, every single day. It’s a new day. And God is in the new day... again... If we’re not snoozing, we’ll find God – oh, not in Barack Obama,

⁴ Again, I have no direct citation, but the quotation as I have received it is, “If it turns out that there is a God, about the most that can be said of him is that he is an underachiever.”

necessarily (this is not a political endorsement), but in a nation that is willing to wake up to its best instincts, to the divine call for “liberty and justice for all.” We’ll find God anywhere that revolutionary cry, that “all [people] are created equal... are endowed... with certain inalienable rights...”, we’ll find God everywhere that equality and those inalienable rights are being exercised.

The first coming isn’t something that just happened once, out back of an inn in Bethlehem... and the second coming isn’t just for some apocalyptic tomorrow. God comes. In small moments. In the movements of churches. In national events. In individual hearts. God comes. Always comes. Where and when we need God most.

But if you snooze... the whole world may end up losing. People of God... it’s time to wake up!

May it be so!