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Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
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Advent Vespers Service

Text: Matthew 24:45-51

The word “Advent” means “coming” and the texts that we read for Advent therefore deal either with the advent of Jesus if they are from the Old Testament, or, in the case of the Gospel texts such as tonight’s, with the so-called second coming of Christ, the time in which all is finally gathered into God, and God’s promises consummated.

These latter texts are rarely very easy for us to deal with. Often they are filled with imagery that is, to say the least, *colorful*. Almost always they speak of judgement and about a final accounting such as tonight’s Gospel does. In very few cases, do we find any easy entrance into what these texts are talking about. The imagery is fantastic, too fantastic. More to the point, we do not easily cotton to the idea of judgement. And we certainly do not like being referred to as “slaves” a term that tonight’s text stresses with respect to those who carry the Lord’s wishes.

Yet, these texts do talk about things that we do deeply worry about, albeit in different terms. Thus, they are very important texts. For example, while we do not talk much about a final judgement, one does frequently hear people talking about living lives that are full of regret, or, conversely, one hears people ardently wishing that, at the end of their lives, they will have lived a life without regret. It is perhaps not very cosmic to talk that way, but the idea that we should, at the end, assess our lives by conscience really is a form of final judgement. And if we are willing to assess our lives by conscience, and even cannot avoid doing so, why should we then not admit that our lives should be assessed by the creator and Lord of our consciences?

And if the answer to that question is that somehow a final assessment of our lives is in

order, and perhaps even inevitable, then tonight's Gospel lesson does have some real importance for us.

The story of judgement that Jesus tells the disciples is a simple one. One slave is put in charge of all the other slaves when the master goes away for a time. No sooner, though, does the master disappear, than does the sense of responsibility that used to dwell in the slave in charge. It isn't hard to imagine the situation. The slave probably figures that there is going to be no accounting for the responsibility he has been given. The master has been gone a long time, maybe he doesn't even exist. In any case, the master can't see, the master will never know. Now, the setting may be ancient, but the plot is contemporary. For nothing more common than lives lived carelessly because we put off the accounting – either of our own consciences, or by failure to consider the one who made our consciences. It is pretty contemporary, too, insofar as the slave heads off for selfish living at the cost of the welfare of those whose lives he has been left in charge of.

Consider simply one glaring example. It is almost trite to mention, but, whether it is or not, simply consider the events of the last week that have been going on with Tiger Woods. Clearly he was a person who thought nobody was watching, and who in time, did no accounting of himself. He managed to surround himself with others who didn't judge either. And what has happened? He has had a brilliant golf career, but he has also revealed a way of life and a character that at the end will be judged by all, including himself, as one that is deeply to be regretted. Why? Where is the regret? It is not that he ruined his athletic career; in fact, he may well at the end take away the record for career wins. His life is to be regretted because he thought that nobody was watching and therefore he treated everybody else, not the least of which was his wife, so badly. He treated everybody else just like the slave treated the other slaves in

the story. So, despite his brilliant career, he compares poorly with the slave who did show responsibility and whom Jesus commends, the good and faithful slave who, when the master returns, is found at his work of providing and caring for all his brethren. That is where the regret ought to be, and where the judgement lies.

Few, if any of us, are quite so bad as Tiger. But understand what is at stake here. It isn't a question of degree. The point of the story isn't whether one is "so bad as that" or whether one is just sort of naughty. The question of judgement and a final assessment isn't one of perfection. The question of judgement to which Jesus wants to draw our attention is simply one of whether or not we have paid attention and stayed awake, especially whether or not we have paid attention to the lives of others. That is the question, or should be the question that lies at the heart of whether we have lived a life with regret or without it. And that question is simply the one Jesus himself asks at the beginning: not whether we are good or not, but whether we are faithful or not, whether we are open enough to watch for the Lord of our consciences and whether we are doing our jobs, because we want to be found working, because we want to be found doing what is good. To have lived that way, is to have judged one's life as a life without regret.