

“HALF-TIME TALK”

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2016

Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Here we are at the beginning of the church year, Advent 1, looking forward to Christmas, and also looking forward to the end of time. What do you say at such a time?

Christine and I went to the Colts game last Sunday, you know, where they were up 21-3 at the half but were totally outplayed in the second half?

I sort of wondered what the half-time talks were like in the two locker rooms. What do you say to a team that is trouncing the opponent? What do you say to a team that is being trounced? It can make a difference what a coach says or fails to say at half-time.

I did a little research into the philosophy of half-time talks, and I got some help from the manager of Scotland’s football (i.e., soccer) team, Gordon Strachan. In an article called “half-time team talks for every occasion” he lists five things you need to do in such a talk: 1) Inspire, but avoid the theatrics; 2) Shake off complacency: know when to go ballistic! 3) Build their confidence: tell them to regain some pride. 4) Keep them focused: Remind them of the plan. 5: Calm them down: Stay quiet, take a breather.

Let’s see how Jesus’ pep talk measures up to Gordon Strachan’s rules!

1. *Inspire, but avoid theatrics.* Jesus does not avoid theatrics. But then he’s not talking about football, he’s talking about the well-being of the whole world, so we can excuse him for being overdramatic. Does he inspire? His idea of inspiration is not the world’s idea. He certainly does not point to any great disciples and the miracles they accomplish.

I guess since he is about to give them his Holy Spirit, he can go light on that for now.

2. *Shake off complacency.* This is practically Jesus’ main point: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. . . . You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour!” It sounds like complacency may have been the main problem for his disciples. Sure, because they were going about with a miracle-worker who spoke with unusual authority. They—and Christians in the second century or the twenty-first century, might easily get lulled into believing that everything will be fine with Jesus around.

3. *Build their confidence:* This is a tricky one. If Jesus were managing a football team, he would be all about building the confidence of each player in themselves. But that is not the nature of the Christian faith. Our faith is precisely faith in Christ. So, the way Jesus is building confidence in his half-time speech is by painting a picture in which their Lord (i.e., the son of Man) IS DEFINITELY one in whom they should place supreme confidence, because look how the earth and heavens play bit parts in the Lord’s scheme. This is a “build their confidence” speech by Jesus, but it builds the confidence of those people whose trust is placed in him.

4. *Keep them focused: remind them of the plan.* Jesus is all over this. It isn’t on display in this part of the chapter, but (for example) it is abundant in the second reading which goes with it. “Let us live honorably.” “Let us lay aside the works of darkness.” “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” To “be ready” as Jesus asks us to be means to always be about our

heavenly Father's business, which means loving and serving one another.

5. *Calm them down: stay quiet, take a breather.* Hmm, Jesus doesn't do this either. I know he had a habit of saying this, however. When his disciples went all apocalyptic on a Samaritan village that would not receive Jesus, he said "Hey, let's move on. Other villages will receive us." Plus he modeled this with his prayer life.

It might not be a bad idea for us to think of the hour of worship as half-time. But half-time is not about half-time. Half-time is about the game; and the Gospel is about life. About what you have faced and what you will face, in your life outside these doors. We were not created for the half-time/sabbath—the sabbath/half-time was created for us, for the renewing of our hearts and minds to face the world armed with gifts of faith, hope, and love.

What I share with you from the Word of God at half-time by way of law and gospel is a firm word from God which describes our situation as dire, yet not hopeless. Dire because of sin, because in our ignorance we often make things worse even when we try to make them better. Dire because of the rampant offense which people give, and the separations among us. Yet not hopeless, because Christ our Lord was given to the world precisely in order to heal the world. He is our Good Samaritan, who stops to do something about what is wrong instead of passing it by. We are his beneficiaries, and when we receive his gifts we become his emissaries, his agents to pour oil on the wounds of the world. There is a plan, and the plan is to unite all things in one, things on earth and things in heaven. The plan calls for uniting all people under the gentle reign of the Son of Man.

When we are not listening to God's pep talk, we are at all times on the playing field. We never sleep. Our faith and hope and love are always being engaged by the realities of our lives. "Keep awake," Jesus says.

The situation is not good. "There will be wars and insurrections," Jesus said. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," Jesus said, and he meant that there is always work for us to be doing. We will be tempted to slack off and let our lives be driven by ego, by personal history, by priorities alien to the kingdom of God. When we do, there will be fumbles and interceptions, and we may even get concussed. It may seem to Christians like we are always the team being trounced, that evil is triumphing over good. So we need to keep our head in the game.

But we are not losing, even if sometimes it feels like we are. We need to keep the faith. The good news is not that we are such great players, it is better than that! The good news is that our future has been pinned to that of the Babe of Bethlehem, and that for his sake we shall be all right. Even if it is a tough game. So, when I say at the end of the service "Go in peace, serve the Lord," and you head back out of the locker room onto the playing field, stick to the plan: Love God, love your neighbor. Take the Spirit of Christ with you, and his peace, and his gifts. They will be quite enough.

Amen