

*Fierce Pajamas*  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Dr. James L. Carter

Readings: Matthew 24:32-44

November 28, 2010  
First Sunday of Advent

I've always wanted to entitle a sermon "Fierce Pajamas" just because I like the electric shock wave that such sartorial madness at bedtime might introduce. I also figure that I won't have many more times to preach on an apocalyptic text like this one for today from Matthew's gospel. Matthew is not as heavy on the apocalyptic emphasis on "the end time" as, say, Mark is but he gets in a few licks here in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters of his gospel. The emphasis is on being prepared, being alert (as opposed to asleep) because you never know when the Day of the Lord will occur. It seems to me that one way to stay awake would be to wear really fierce pajamas. Then, neither you nor your sleeping partner would be able to reach such a deep sleep that you wouldn't hear whoever comes along "like a thief

in the night.” So, it seems to me that “fierce pajamas” provides a metaphorical image of what being alert to what God is doing in our time is all about.

E. B. White, the New Yorker writer and children’s book author, was the first to coin the phrase in our title. He wrote an essay in the heart of the last Great Depression (1934) entitled *Dusk in Fierce Pajamas*. It was a sardonic look at the fashion magazines of the period. He had been reading a few while sick in bed and noticed that all of the beautiful people in the photographs seemed to be posing at dusk:

Lying here in these fierce pajamas, I dream of the *Harper’s Bazaar* world, the *Vogue* life; dream of being a part of it. In fancy I am in Mrs. Cecil Baker’s pine-paneled drawing-room. It is dusk. (It is almost always dusk in the fashion magazines.) I have on a Gantner and Mattern knit jersey bathing suit with a flat striped bow and an all-white buck shoe with a floppy tongue. No, that’s wrong. I am in chiffon, for it is the magic hour after bridge...<sup>1</sup> (and so on... you get the drift.)

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. White, “Dusk in Fierce Pajamas”, (reprinted in *Fierce Pajamas: An Anthology of Humor Writing from The New Yorker*, Ed. by David Remnick and Henry Finder, The Modern Library, 2001) p, 8.

With *Duck in Fierce Pajamas* White is having his fun with his readers whether it is 1924, in the pages of the magazine or reprinted for today in Editor David Remnick's collection of humor pieces from *The New Yorker* magazine. We know what it is to be so out of touch with reality that one actually believes it important to be fashionable at dusk and cocktail time even if out on the street people are selling apples for a dime in order to gather a little change for dinner. White's sardonic wit is not lost on us in any age.

We also know something about being awake to what is happening in our time. We know that not everyone can be as prescient about the future as some political and economic visionaries. We're not all able to win a Nobel Prize as Princeton's Paul Krugman did recently for explaining an economic trend he saw twenty-two years earlier. But theologically speaking, we are smart enough and awake enough to realize that it is apparently going to be awhile until the coming of the eschaton. Matthew had figured that out in the latter part of the first century.

Rather than trying to predict the time and the place of the second coming (Matthew says not to worry about that) he puts the emphasis on being prepared, being awake, and being aware of what is going on in the here and

now. Then, follows the implication, if you don't like the trend you are seeing, do something about it. Some, like the beautiful people in the fashion magazines White was reading, escape to fantasy. Others at that same time, like the Depression era's new president, elected in 1932, decide to act in ways that can make a difference in the way the world turns. FDR saw one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-fed, and unemployed and he believed something could be done about that in his time as president. Some find hope for a similar strong response to economic crisis in our time from both the public and the private sector.

It is the attitude of preparedness and the resolve to be responsive to the issues of the time that I think we can learn from these apocalyptic passages in Matthew. Staying awake, being alert is a big part of making appropriate responses. (We are much more effective in real time than in our dreams and fantasies). We can be the best dressed figures at dusk in Manhattan, but if we are not awake to the realities of our present and future we will still be broke and out of work. That is why a posture of readiness to deal with the here and now is so emphasized by Matthew, just as it is by your local psychotherapist.

(Being trust “present” is considered essential if one plans to live and act effectively in response to current developments in one’s life.)

## II

This matter of being aware of what is going on around us is the purpose of the exercises we, as a congregation, are going through at present. We are conducting surveys and going to focus groups to visit with others about what has value for us at the church and what we hope will happen in the church’s future. We are becoming sensitized to our present situation, expressing gratitude for all that is positive and abundant while showing willingness to be candid about what we would like to do differently. We look and listen, we see and respond, we give thanks and express our reasons for being hopeful. We are forming a clear picture of what we believe and in who and what we put our faith for the future. We are quite different from the fellow one of my Unitarian friends told me about last week when he asked with a twinkle in his eye, “Do you know what you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a

Unitarian?” I replied that I didn’t know what that cross would produce. He said, “It gives you a fellow who rings doorbells with no apparent purpose.”

We differ from that fellow. We make our witness and give our testimony and declare what we believe that God in Christ is doing in our time, in our lives, in this place. We seek to be alert to what God is doing in our midst and to what God is calling us to be and to do in our lifetime, while we are wide awake.

Commentator Bob Herbert wrote a newspaper column at the time of the previous election cycle in 2008 that I have held onto. He remembered another use of that word “fierce” which E.B. White lifted up during the first Great Depression. Bob Herbert said that it was Martin Luther King who used to speak about the “fierce urgency of now” and that it was because of that emphasis, he believes, that so much was accomplished for the advancement of civil rights and voting rights legislation in the 1960s. (Think of Dr. King meeting with LBJ in the Oval Office in 1965, to press him on Voting Rights Legislation).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Herbert, column, *The New York Times*, November 4, 2008, p. A35

Someone may ask, “What does it mean, this ‘fierce urgency of now?’”  
“Well”, says Bob Herbert in that column of 2008, “if your house is on fire and your family is still inside, that’s an example of the fierce urgency of now.”

That column was first written at a time that a new administration had come into the White House. I wonder what he would write today as some see our country languishing and in need of strong intervention and courageous action by both White House and Congress. I sometimes find myself wondering if those in positions of leadership have lost their fierce pajamas because they certainly seem to be slow to respond to the alarms.

### III

We can all do well to listen to Jesus’ admonition to wakefulness in these apocalyptic sayings from Matthew’s gospel. We are being urged to alertness for a reason, the very same reason we are conducting our surveys

and listening groups: *We Want To Be Alert So That We Can Discern What God Is Doing In Our Midst and To What Purpose.*

It isn't that we seek to have the mind of God nor is it that we want no longer to live by faith because we now know what God will do next. Quite the opposite: we reaffirm our commitment to live by faith, remaining alert to the overtures and moves that God is making in our lives and in the mission of Christ's Church in Bryn Mawr. We do not seek to know the mind of God so much as to know God's Spirit at work among us, leading, challenging, affirming us in our pilgrimage of faith.

Thanks be to God.