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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The First Sunday of Advent**

*"And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." -Mark 13:37*

"Watch." "Keep awake." "Be alert." "Watch." Those are the imperatives that Jesus repeats, over and over, when he speaks of the day when the Son of Man will come in the clouds and with great power and glory.

We don't really know how to title that day. Is it the Day of the Apocalypse? Is it the Day of Judgement? Is it the Last Days? Is it the Day of the Second Coming, when Jesus comes back?

Every generation produces another set of predictions. If you are a wise, you will not waste your time with those predictions. They become jokes that we use at cocktail parties, like the latest one a few months ago, when some earnest and dim-witted soul posted on billboards the day of the Lord's return and "the end of the earth as we know it." You remember that. Let it go.

Things do end in our lives. Our life will end, at some point. Even this earth, as we know it, will end some day. But it does little good trying to predict the actual day and time of that end. Rather, the healthy Christian discipline is to practice. The healthy Christian discipline is to practice for its ending, year in and year out, day in and day out.

The big turning points of our calendars, the beginnings and ends of years, are not nearly so important as the little turning points of our actual lives, like our daily beginnings and ends.

So, I do not pay much attention to those who get overexcited about the end times, or the second coming of Jesus. And I do not get overexcited about grand New Year's Day observances. How is January 1st actually that much different from December 31st?

In the same way, I do not get overexcited about this particular day in our church calendar, what we call the liturgical calendar. Some of you realize that today, the First Sunday of Advent, is the New Year's Day of our liturgical calendar. On this day, our church, and other churches across Christendom, turn the calendar page over. We begin anew our cycle of readings and observances.

Thus, New Year's Day in the Christian Church, is not January 1st, or December 25 (Christmas), or even Easter (which it really should be!) Instead, the beginning of the new year in the Christian Church is the Fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. We call it The First Sunday of Advent.

I will not go into its history of this day, except to say that this is an odd time to be observing a new year. I did not hear many party horns and whistles going off last night - except maybe after the Tech-Georgia football game. Nobody seems to

have made any new year's resolutions, though some people have probably resolved to go on a diet after Thanksgiving Day feasts.

Well, New Year's Day is not such a big thing in the Christian Church. It is not like Christmas or Easter, when time really does stop. Our New Year's Day is simply the day when we turn the calendar page. It is the day that we begin again our cycle of assigned readings and observances. The schedule of readings that we begin again today will take us through everything - the annunciation and birth of Jesus, the life and ministry of Jesus, the death, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, and then the ordinary time - focusing on the teaching and daily practice of Jesus. It is our routine. We follow an annual routine.

I also follow daily routines. This past week, I was on the coast, on the coast of the great state of Georgia. And especially there, but also in almost every place where I sleep, I try to wake up at least an hour before the sun rises. In fact, it is rather inevitable that I wake up about an hour before sunrise, no matter where I am.

But on the east coast, that rising is especially dramatic. I try to get to the beach, where I can see the horizon, where I can watch. Then, ever so gently, and sometimes with great cloudy power, or with brilliantly red drama, the sun rises up from the ocean. The sun is our earth's ongoing nuclear explosion, its massive power heating the earth even on dark and cloudy days.

The sun might be considered a scary, end-of-the-world kind of thing. It should overwhelm us. But most of the time, it rises whether we are paying attention or not. And it rises even when I cannot see it through some massive cloud cover.

But when the sun rises, a new day has begun. If I am being particularly alert, then, I, too, am able to rise. I, too, am able to rise to a new day. But it takes being alert. It takes being awake.

This, I think, is part of what Jesus meant, when he said, over and over again, "Watch, be alert, stay awake, pay attention." Days come and go all the time. Lives come and go all the time. Even the earth changes, all the time.

But pay attention. Because God has something new for us during every one of those moments. In moments of beginning and in moments of ending, God has something new for us.

Human civilizations all over the world mark New Year's Day occasions, in all sorts of ways, and on a great variety of different days. No matter what our culture, we human beings know that things die and things come to life. Including us. Days and years end, and we begin new days and new years.

The way we practice those ordinary turnings has everything to do with how we finally meet our own new life. This is why the Church marks the occasions of nightfall and daybreak. Every day we pray as night falls that our sins are forgiven and that we will wake to new life in the morning. This is practice.

Every Sunday, we turn over another week. We give thanks and break bread together with the remembrance of the Great Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We gather on Sunday to witness to a Resurrection that towers over the wrecks of time. We practice dying and rising again to new life. We practice. Every time we go through some major change in life - entering a new job or a new home, or even undergoing some crisis, we are practicing. We are practicing resurrection.

This is why the Church keeps the season of Advent, a season of four weeks before Christmas. We know that a child will soon be born. We know that Christmas celebrates the joy and peace of new life. We long for that new birth.

But we also know that birth comes after a death. Before we observe Christmas, we make the same observation that millions before us have made. The Son of Man comes often at an unexpected hour. The advice of Jesus is to keep awake; keep alert; stay awake.

"Everything else can wait," someone once said, "but the search for God cannot wait." Keep awake. It is when we keep awake, stay alert, that we can see the presence of God shining through what seem like ordinary events.

There is a huge sun rising today. It has the capacity to scare people with its power. And, yet, most of us have not even

noticed its rising.

"Pay attention," Jesus says. "Watch." It is when we are alert that we can notice the presence of a living God even in the midst of events that look like death. It is when we are awake that we see resurrection and new life rising over our traditional and usual routines. It is when we watch, that we might notice a new year beginning right now, even during these anxious days of December.

"Watch. Be alert. Watch."

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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