
Two Words

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Advent 1

"Be alert," said Jesus, "Be alert at all times."
Luke 21.36

We have begun to hear it, haven't we? There is a particular refrain that we have already begun to hear this past week. We began to hear it the day after Thanksgiving, mingled in with "Jolly Old St. Nicholas," and "Silent Night."

It goes like this: "You better watch out, you better not cry. You better be good, I'm telling you why." You know the refrain. For a child, it's relatively harmless. "You better be good!" We know the effect it has on a rambunctious child who is otherwise a delightful person. Some days she just needs to hear, "You better watch out!"

Sadly, there are some who never graduate from that refrain. For them, these words of the pre-Christmas ditty stay with them through adulthood. "You better watch out." "You better watch out." It's not just Santa Claus who will give you what you deserve; it's God himself."

Yes, there is a particular refrain that attaches itself to every Christian generation, too, year after year and century after century. It goes like this: "You better watch out."

"There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. ...There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ...So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near." (Luke 21:11, 25, 31)

And this is the gospel lesson that the Christian Church hears every First Sunday of Advent! Just after we have feasted on Thanksgiving turkey and just after we have broken bread with those we love, or at least with those we try to love. When our shops and malls are decorated with brightness, and even many of our homes have sprouted Christmas lights, we come to Church, and we hear something dreadfully different.

A friend of mine calls the season of Advent the most counter-cultural time of the Church. Everybody around us is saying eat, drink, shop, and be merry. The Church is saying, "You better watch out."

Of course we'd better watch out. Somewhere deep in our souls, we know that our merriment will not last forever. We know that our lives will not last forever. It is good to be alert. That is the way Jesus ends his great speech today about the Day of Judgment. Be alert, he says.

Well and good. But "Be alert" for what? Be alert for the signs of destruction and turmoil?

No, I do not think so.

I believe that Jesus wants us to be watching for something else. Jesus wants us to be listening for something else. When the world seems to be falling apart around us, Jesus wants us to "be alert" for something else.

I acknowledge that, one day, the doomsday prophets will be right. One day - I do not know what day it will be- but one day, the prophets of doom will get it right, almost by accident. One day, the mountains will topple into the sea. One day, there will be a great earthquake. For some people in the world, that day will be tomorrow.

But is that what we are supposed to be on the alert for? No, I do not think so.

I know that there is trouble in the world. When we are all set to relax and celebrate with friends, something awful and terrible occurs. We know that those things happen. Is that what we are supposed to be alert for? No, I don't think so.

I know that we get things wrong. When we have worked diligently all day in the kitchen, and we have proudly presented our Thanksgiving meal, we know that the gravy is not quite right. When the sourpuss of the family complains about it, we know that they are right. But is that the point of the meal? To note its faults? No, it isn't.

When folks have worked tirelessly to create our communities of faith. When folks have volunteered to care for our children. When folks have answered God's call to teach and to lead. When folks have offered their time for mission and outreach, we know that errors are made despite our best efforts. We know that there are some things we do not get right. Is that what we are meant to "be alert" to? To watch out for what goes wrong, so we can pounce upon the perpetrator of mistakes?

No, there is a stronger refrain in the Christian tradition than "You better watch out." There is a more powerful chorus that we are meant to be alert for. There will always be the Chicken Little in the corner, complaining that his dinner seat is not in the right place, pointing out that the clouds are threatening rain. All of that is right. But that is not what we are meant to be on the alert for.

There will always be the person who observes that there is a war going on. Nation has risen up against nation. The world is in an uproar. Our president, our governor, our mayor, someone who has responsibility -whoever it is-- is not exercising it properly. Whoever the politician is, the observer is bound to be right at least once or twice. But is that what we are meant to be listening for?

Whatever we are eating, someone else is distressed that there is a famine somewhere. Someone else points out that the plague is coming. Certainly these are signs, aren't they? Isn't the world coming to an end?

Yes, the world will end someday. Every human being knows this somewhere deep in our souls, even if we dare not express it. It is built into our spiritual DNA, and some of our fellow human beings have a much stronger genetic predisposition for this trait. These are the folks who pack up months of food and flee into Montana. Something about their forecast is always at least partly right. And if the world doesn't end tomorrow, someone's life may end. We know this.

But is this what we are supposed to be on the alert for? Is this what we are supposed to spend our lives listening for, and forecasting, and waiting for? The signs of heaven which portend the end of the world?

No, in the Christian tradition, there is a stronger refrain than "You better watch out." There is a more powerful chorus that we are meant to be alert for.

I have heard it. I heard it, too, this past week. I heard it on Thanksgiving Day, when so many gathered in this great Cathedral for morning worship. You heard it, too. You heard it on Thanksgiving Day, when the smallest child at your table, turned to her parent and said it.

We heard it when our father turned to his son and said it. A thousand mothers heard it. We hear it often, very often, if we open our ears. And sometimes, when we do not hear it, it becomes our responsibility to say it. If someone else is not singing the chorus, then it must be our turn to take the solo.

It is a simple phrase, but its power is overwhelming. It is a refrain that consists, really, of only two words, but those two words are the exact opposite of "Watch out," and they penetrate far deeper.

They are the two words that we are called, always, to be on the alert for. They are the best words that could be on our lips if the world is ending, or if our life is ending. In fact, we are meant to be on the alert for these words especially when times are rough. Especially when something has gone wrong. Especially when someone is complaining. Especially when we hear of wars and famines and plagues and irresponsibility.

These are the very times that we are meant to be on the alert for the two most powerful words of the kingdom of heaven. The two most powerful words that will stand when all else has fallen away. Heaven and earth will indeed pass away, but there are two words which Jesus teaches us that will not pass away at all.

The words are "Thank you." The Christian refrain is "Thank you." The heavenly chorus is "Thank you." I hope you heard them this past week. I hope you hear them today. I hope you will hear them throughout these Advent season and into Christmas.

Try singing their song. "Thank you." They are words which will change your life. They are the words to be on the alert for. They are the words to listen for. They are the words to sing. They are the words stronger than any earthquake or famine or plague. "Thank you."

Heaven and earth will pass away, but "Thank you" will not pass away. They, too, are built into the genetic construction of every human being and of creation itself. To give thanks is the greatest act that any one of us can ever do. To thank particularly another person changes that person forever. To thank particularly another person changes that person into the image of God.

Yes, God, to whom we give glory and thanks this day, this week, this season, and forever.

AMEN.

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