
Keep Awake: The Day of the Lord

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
The First Sunday of Advent - Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:37-44

Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.
Matthew 24: 42

The Day of the Lord! The Day of the Lord is coming!

Some of us have been trained to think of those words as ominous and threatening, indicating a day of judgement and perhaps punishment. And some of us have heard that the Day of the Lord might just be a glorious and wondrous moment, a moment of utter salvation and restful redemption.

Which is it? Judgment or Glory? Well, maybe the "Day of the Lord" is like being a college football fan on the Saturday after Thanksgiving! One never knows whether that day will be judgment or glory: Tech-Georgia, Auburn-Alabama, South Carolina-Clemson, Duke-North Carolina. Judgment or glory. Sometimes, one never knows even if there is only one second left in the game!

For Christians, the term has also come to be called "The Second Coming." The day of the Lord will be the second coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ. That is why we hear these confounding lessons this morning. They confound those of us watching television who think we have just entered the Thanksgiving/Christmas mode of our lives.

The four Sundays before Christmas in the Christian year have come to be called the season of Advent, and this Sunday is thus "New Year's Day." We begin a new liturgical year in the Church today.

In the Church's strange and ancient wisdom, before we celebrate the occasion of Christ's first coming, Christmas, we must start today by remembering that Christ will also come again. Christ will come as a second coming.

Now, I must admit: I don't much care for the church's strange and ancient wisdom when it comes to calendar arranging. It makes very little common sense that we begin a new year four Sundays before Christmas. Why not just say Christmas, the birth of Jesus is the new year? That date occurs quite close to the Winter solstice, when the nights are longest, and when the light of our days, like the light of Christ, begins to grow longer.

Or, the even better date for a new calendar year beginning would be some time in the Spring. This date is so observed for many ancient civilizations. The Spring equinox marks new life and rebirth. Indeed, for Christians, Easter Day might

properly mark the beginning of a new year; that day observes resurrection and new life for us. Theologically, our new year might easily start there.

Instead, today we inherit the calendar decisions of our ancestors. By the way, for most of the history of western civilization, we did observe March 25 as the beginning of our new year. It was the Feast of the Conception of Jesus Christ. Thus, the month of April, and April 1, was New Year's Day. It was not until March of 1582 that Pope Gregory XIII reformed the calendar to make January 1 New Year's Day. Those who continued to keep April 1 as New Year's Day were called April Fools. Thus, April Fools Day.

Yes, today, we inherit the calendar decisions of our ancestors, and most of us cannot change the date whereon we celebrate the beginning of a new year. But we can do something about how we celebrate a new year.

If our church lessons today want to remind us of the second coming of Christ, then let us admit something. Let's acknowledge this: no one really knows much about the so-called second coming of the Lord. Christian history itself demonstrates this truth: time and time again, prognosticators have gotten it wrong. We know neither the time nor the place. In our Eucharistic prayer, we claim, generally, that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," but we conduct endless discussions on what that "coming again" really means. Is it a literal coming again, in the same way that Jesus of Nazareth showed up?

I hope most of us smile when we hear the latest actual literal calculation. Somewhere, even today, some earnest soul is working out self-developed hidden codes and is trying to determine an actual date on which Jesus will come again. I smile at the people who take such speculation literally, because they should be taking this biblical verse literally: Matthew 24:52. At that verse, Jesus says, quite literally, that "you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Despite what Jesus said, Christians have been trying to determine the second coming with numbers and dates and clocks and calendars ever since. The Day of the Lord. The Second Coming. The End Times. The end of one age and the beginning of another one. The end of one year and the beginning of another one.

Well, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what day and date and year you come up with. March 25. January 1. The First Sunday of Advent. Easter Sunday. The fiscal year. The school year. Your birthday. Your death day. It doesn't matter.

Here's the thing: Things do end in our lives. Our lives 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 our endings, year in and year out, day in and day out. Because when we practice our endings, we are also practicing a new beginning.

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.

But I do get excited about daily routines. This past week, I was on the coast, on the coast of the great state of Georgia. On the east coast, I am especially fascinated by the sunrise, which is truly dramatic there. I try to get to the beach, where I can see the horizon, where I can watch. But, of course, I have to wake up early. There, 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 (and it seems to have been almost that, for the Comet Ison!). It should terrify us. But it doesn't feel like judgment; it feels like salvation and new life! 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, "Keep awake, watch, be alert, pay attention." He says that whenever he is talking about the Day of the Lord. The truth, is that 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.

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 be forgiven and that we might 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 are practicing 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 can come any time at all. Before we observe Christmas, we make the same observation that millions before us have made. The Christ comes often at an unexpected hour, not according to any calendar at all. The advice of Jesus is to keep awake; be alert; stay awake.

And, of course, football games are not the end of the world; and they are not the center of the world either!

It is when we keep awake that we 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, it also provides the warmth and light of new life. The Day of the Lord is a good thing; it is the moment of new life.

"Keep awake," Jesus says. "Watch." Every day is New Year's Day. The Day of the Lord is today!

AMEN.

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