
Watch, Keep Alert, and Pray

A sermon by the Rev. Salmoon Bashir
The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 28, Year B

Some of you probably know the historical context of India and Pakistan. In 1947, following the end of British rule, the region was divided on a religious basis into two separate countries: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Since then, these two nations have gone to war at least five times. In the past 30 years, both have become nuclear-armed states, which has only intensified tensions over the past 77 years.

A few years ago, when I was living in the Republic of Georgia, one of my very good friends was from India, a medical doctor, obviously, and with whom I, a Pakistani, had built quite a strong friendship. At the time, both countries once again were on the verge of war. We were expecting the war to break out at any moment. On top of the stress of this international conflict, I was also navigating a major transition in my personal life, as I had made the decision to leave my career in the oil and gas industry to pursue ordained ministry in the Anglican/Episcopal Church. This period was quite difficult as I was trying to figure out the financial aspects of my transition, and honestly, I needed a miracle.

My Indian friend, Ankit, and I shared a bond like brothers, regardless of what was happening at the borders or within the political climate between our countries. One of the things I deeply admired about him was his unwavering faith and belief in the power of prayer which never ceased to inspire me. When I shared my worries with him, his first response after listening to me was, "Brother Salmoon, let's pray about this, let's bring it before God."

And when the miraculous breakthrough happened in my life only days after I had talked to him, Ankit was one of the first people I called, and I came to know at that time that he had been fasting and praying for me that whole week.

When I was in desperate need of a miracle, a friend, a brother—and to outsiders, someone from an enemy country—was fasting and praying for me at that very moment. An Indian man praying for his Pakistani brother in the midst of war threats. That is the spirit of love in the face of division and hate. It is the power of prayer, which is far stronger in uniting us than any force that seeks to pull us apart. Through prayer, we can overcome our divisions and draw closer to the heart of God—the heart filled with God's overflowing love!

Today's gospel lesson is a challenging one, and I'd like to talk about it in the broader context of the entire 13th chapter of Mark's gospel. In this chapter, we see the eschatological views (the doctrine of the last things), the prediction of the destruction of the temple, wars, famine, and Jesus telling his disciples what will happen during the end times—nation against nation, race against race, mother against daughter, father against son, and the signs of the end times. However, Jesus also tells his disciples what to do in the midst of turmoil, division, and war. He had just spoken to them about the difficult days ahead—persecution, rumors of wars, suffering, and confusion. Then he shifts his focus, speaking directly to his disciples: "Be alert. Watch and pray!" Jesus commands his disciples, **and us**, to keep watch and pray—constantly, until the end times. Pray all the time.

Pray when you're happy, pray when you're sad! Pray when God seems far from you and pray when you feel the presence of God around and in you. Jesus knew how easily we get distracted, how quickly our attention can drift away from what truly matters. There is no prayer big or small. Look at Psalms filled with honest prayers, simple yet powerful words, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of lamentation, prayers during anger, and also prayers of praise. Pray for those who agree with you and pray for those who have opposite views than yours. These are the prayers of a person during all sorts of times. Unceasing prayers.

Friends, we live in a world that is constantly calling us to look here, go there, take care of this, and pay attention to that. But even in the middle of all that demand, Jesus tells us to *Be alert. Watch and pray*. This isn't just about watching and praying for the "end times" or some dramatic event; it's about being spiritually awake and aware right now.

It's about being attentive to God's presence in the everyday moments—those glimpses of grace that can easily go unnoticed if we're not paying attention. It is about lifting up of eyes to Jesus because "*my help comes from the Lord*." Praying at all times doesn't mean you're constantly reciting formal prayers; or prayer is not just a specific action we do for a few minutes in the morning or at night. To keep watch and pray means you're keeping your heart open to God's presence and you are continuously inviting God in your thoughts. It means recognizing that He's with you in the mundane and the extraordinary, in the chaos and in the quiet. It's a **posture of the heart**, a way of living that keeps us connected to God in every moment.

A number of people have told me, that at times it is difficult to pray, it is difficult to be consistent or undistracted during prayer. This is understandable, and unsurprisingly, very common.

If you are struggling to form and keep a rule of prayer, I encourage you to start small. Start with having a fleeting thought about God first thing in the morning as you open your eyes. Or when you do not have words, patience or you don't have a Book of Common Prayer, just say the word: "Jesus. Jesus..."

Brothers and Sisters, remember that there is a simple way of meeting Jesus, every day, at any moment of the day! It is called prayer! Prayer is not sending a request to the sky; it is about allowing God to make us more like Jesus Christ. Make our heart like the heart of Jesus, who even at the last minute of his earthly life was praying to his father and was filled and full of the overflowing love.

Friends, this morning, let us pray that the Spirit of the living God renew us, enabling us to stand firm against every form of evil and empowering us to love one another deeply.

Prayer has the power to unite those who, by all appearances, are worlds apart. It transforms hearts and fosters life-giving relationships. Indeed, prayer can even bring together those from enemy nations—like myself and Ankit—allowing us to fast and pray for one another through times of trials and tribulations. May the power of prayer fill us with love, like the heart of God overflowing with Love! *Watch, keep alert, and pray!* Amen!