

Living on Full Alert

Matthew 24: 36-44

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Surprise! Surprise! Life is full of surprises! Some surprises are awesome. Someone will get an engagement ring for Christmas. Some surprises are awful. As long as we live, will we ever forget those exploding Twin Towers? Some surprises are a combination of awesome and awful. A parishioner called her pastor and said, “I need a little help. My father just won a 30 million dollar lottery. He is 96 years old, has heart trouble and I am concerned if I tell him, he will have a heart attack. Would you mind paying him a visit?” Of course, the pastor agreed. Sitting in the old gentleman’s home, they talked about sports, the weather, and life in general. Finally, the pastor asked the old man, “Suppose you won 30 million dollars. How would that change your life?” “It wouldn’t,” said the man. “I would still have arthritis and still be 96 years old. In fact, if I had 30 million dollars, I would give it to the Church.” That is when the pastor had a heart attack.

THE SEASON OF ADVENT HAS ARRIVED. Biblically speaking, Advent is both awesome and awful. It is “get ready” time. It is get ready, not for Christmas, but for Christ. The One who was, who is and who is to come, has arrived, is here, and is yet to return. If that blows your sense of time and space, the Babe of Bethlehem is the present Christ who is returning as the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is time to get ready for Christ. On our way to Holy Communion today, consider the Christian Doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ, or the Parousia, as our Christian theology calls it.

CHRIST IS COMING—BE TRUSTING.

The musical group, Chicago, recorded a song several years ago asking, “Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?” When it comes to predicting the end of the world, Jesus says, nobody knows what time it is but God, so why should the rest of us care at all. Verse 36 *But about the day and the hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, or the Son, but only the Father.* I know it is a blow to the human ego. We always want to know what is happening. When we do not know, we usually make up something. People have been doing that about the end of time since the beginning of time.

History is full of people ignoring this statement of Jesus. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he speaks harshly about idleness saying, *those who don’t work shouldn’t eat.* It was not a condemnation or judgment on the unemployed, but a warning to those who had decided there was no earthly reason to work, if the Second Coming was happening in a moment and Christ was returning. We have been doing it ever since.

In 960, German theologian, Bernard of Thuringa, calculated the end of the world

to be in 992. Astrologer, Johann Stoffler, said the world would be flooded on February 20, 1524. Solomon Eccles, in 1665, ran through the streets of London carrying blazing sulfur on his head announcing that the world was going to go up in flames within the year. In 1874, Charles Russell, founder of Jehovah's Witnesses, concluded that Christ had already returned, but people would have another forty years of grace. In 1914 the denomination was forced to revise its timetable. Herbert Armstrong, in his publication, *Plain Truth*, set the date for the end of the world as January 7, 1972. Remember the Y2K frenzy we went through two years ago when half the world decided that the end was here? On September 12th of this year, a false quote of the 16th century French astrologer, Nostradamus, spread across the Internet, saying, "Metal birds, striking twin brothers, will mark the end of the world."

The Bible says, *Our times are in God's hands.* We think in minutes. God thinks in millenniums. Psalm 90:4 states, *For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by or like a watch in the night.* We count the days. God considers eternity. *You are God,* said Nehemiah, *who is from everlasting to everlasting.* (9:5) We see through a glass darkly. God has the full view. *When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, We've no less days to sing God's praise, than when we'd first begun.* If you can figure that out, you are wiser than I. Eternity is more than I can get my arms around. I do not have any perception of what eternity might be, do you? If you are going to tell time in light of eternity, do it on God's clock, not ours. No human being knows the day, nor the hour. Christ is coming. Just trust that stuff to God.

CHRIST IS COMING—BE FAITHFUL.

V 40: *Two men will be in the field, one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill, one will be taken and the other left.*

The scene is the interior of a Boeing 747. It is the wee hours of morning and the plane is somewhere over the Atlantic en route to London. The captain leaves his cockpit and strolls down the aisle intending to flirt with the senior flight attendant. She is in shock. People are missing. They have vanished leaving shoes, socks, clothes, jewelry—everything behind. An elderly lady, sitting in first class, cries as she holds her husband's sweater and pants. She has been left behind.

So begins the immensely popular fiction series, *Left Behind*, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Seven volumes are now on the market with seventeen million copies sold, along with a movie, web site, 2002 calendar, and survivor kits for children and youth. It is not my place to fault Tyndale publishers for tripling their company's profits in the last two years, but I am here to tell you *Left Behind* is fiction, not fact. It has more to do with finances than faith. Its miracle lies in its marketing, not its theology. The Rapture, on which the whole series is built, is the remote idea that believers will somehow be caught up in the clouds with Jesus to avoid the great persecution spreading over the earth. Matthew knows nothing about a Rapture when he talks about end times. Just read the text.

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. In Christian theology what we have here is the “Parousia—the arrival of the King to His kingdom,” not a secret disappearance of the faithful. The Second Coming of Christ will not be private, ambiguous, hidden, and invisible. It will be triumphant, victorious, vibrant, and visible. While He came one time in secret, as a Baby in an unknown place, the next time, the trumpet shall sound. We used to sing it:

*When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time will be no more,
When the morning breaks eternal bright and fair,
When the saved on earth shall gather over on the other shore,
When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*

So, we are called not to be fearful, but to be faithful. In the dailyness work routines of life, we are called to be faithful. St. Francis, Saint of Nature, was hoeing his garden. A philosopher friend approached him and asked, “Francis, what would you do if you learned you would die before the sun sets?” St. Francis thought a moment and replied, “I would keep hoeing my garden.”

While some of us might be asked to risk dying for our faith, most of us must risk living faithful lives. In the *Upper Room* a few years ago, there was a devotional written about Theresa. Theresa is in the choir today. Two months ago she gave birth to her first born child, a son. He lived ten days. Everyone prayed that he would be fine. The doctors thought he was getting better, but suddenly the baby died. But, Theresa is in the choir today singing about Jesus being a rock in a weary land, a shelter in the time of storm. She could have gotten bitter. Instead, she got better. Theresa is in the choir today, singing about her faith which sustains her day after day. So, never a day passes, but that someone is taken and another left. Whether swept away or left behind, let us find the kind of faith that we need to keep on keeping on. Christ is coming—be faithful.

CHRIST IS COMING—BE READY

Be alert. Watch, is the Biblical word. Since September 11th, the world has lived on full alert. Soldiers at Fort Campbell are ready to move into combat at a moment’s notice. Reserves in all branches of the military are preparing to be called. Our President has asked us to be more alert of suspicious people and strange circumstances. Fear has forced us to full attention. You hear planes that you never heard before. I never noticed the planes flying over my house until September the 11th. Now I notice them all the time. You never open a letter without at least thinking a little bit about it. You feel funny around people that are different than you. Living in this kind of fear is going to hurt and destroy us. We cannot do this. Among other things, it is going to make us prejudiced against innocent people. It already is doing it. Furthermore, it is going to cause us to live in a house of fear when we are called to live in a house of faith, as Henry Nowen put it.

I ask you today to be on watch, but do not watch out. Look up. That is a different

kind of watchfulness. Do not watch out, because there is danger on every corner. You cannot live like that. Look up, with a kind of hopeful anticipation that puts you on tiptoe, to the coming of Christ in our midst.

When I survived a bout with cancer, especially the chemotherapy and radiation, I came out on the other side to discover that I was seeing the world through a new set of eyes. The grass was greener than I had ever seen it. I said to Sandy the following spring, “Is this a different spring than all the ones before? The flowers are more vibrant in color.” She said, “No, it’s just you. You are seeing it differently.” Relationships became more important to me than ever before. Competition took a backseat in one of the most competitive individuals who ever walked the face of the earth. Work became an opportunity, not an obligation. Nothing had changed, but on the other hand, everything had changed. I had changed. I had touched bottom and discovered the bottom was sound. I had found life, not as a right to be earned, but a gift to be received. I did not want the disease, but I would not trade what it taught me for anything in life.

It is this kind of watchfulness that the Christian has in life. It is a sense of embracing life, knowing it is no longer a right, but a beautiful, wonderful gift that God has entrusted to you.

“Watch” is the word of Matthew. Christ is coming. Like a child anxious for Christmas, I can hardly wait! How about you?

Amen.

