

ON THE ALERT!
MARK 13:32-37
DECEMBER 15, 1985

Continuing the Advent theme--BEHOLD A MIGHTY PROPHET--the third stanza of the anthem reads: "O Zion's sons and daughters hasten forth to greet you, Lord...Rise up, O Jerusalem, stand upon the heights." It reminds me of Jesus' parable about the ten maidens who stayed through the night to greet the bridegroom. Their mission was to greet the groom, but five had forgotten to fill their lamps with oil, and when the oil ran out, they went to refill their lamps. While they were gone, the bridegroom came. They missed the action. They failed to be on the alert.

During the season of Advent, keep on the alert. Something is going to happen, but as it is not yet ready to happen, we are in a state of waiting, a state of expectation. Advent--the season of waiting--does not necessarily mean that we are to be sober and somber as if waiting is not fun. In many ways the days preceding the opening of the gifts under the tree are as much fun as the event itself. Anticipation, shaking the presents, measuring, smelling, are part of the waiting, the watching. When we don't wait, when we open the presents ahead of time, or when we try to celebrate Christmas all through December, instead of waiting for Christmas Eve, we miss the fun of anticipation.

Waiting is difficult, and our culture encourages instant gratification. We really don't want to wait. We want our pleasures now. We want our rewards now. If you are not successful and happy in your work after the first week or hours, you tend to be disappointed, or bored. Children can't wait to grow up. They wear make-up, dress in formals, go to dances. Kindergarten classes have graduation ceremonies with cap and gown. One wonders if it is the children who can't wait or their parents.

Marie Winn in her recent book, Children Without Childhood, makes the disturbing point that childhood is in danger of dying. She documents the loss of innocence among American children with alarming evidence. Ten-year-olds use language on the playground that once was the province of street gangs. Sixth graders read books about prostitution and gang rape, watch pornographic movies on cable TV, and experiment with drugs and sex. Children are being denied the happy and carefree years of childhood. Children are growing up too fast.

After three years of extensive interviews, the author is convinced that we're leaving an "Age of Protection" of children and entering a new "Age of Preparation." Instead of shielding children from what they perceive as the harsh realities of life, parents often try to steel themselves and their youngsters for the worst to come. The parents seem to believe that early awareness will help their children deal with the inevitable problems of adulthood. As a result, children are growing up without a childhood, missing the experience of being a child--of being dependent, protected and nurtured by loving parents--which, in the long run, is what prepares children for adulthood.

Advent is the season of waiting. Advent tells us that a major part of life is learning how to wait, how to watch, how to be on the alert. Hasten to greet the Lord, and then wait for the Lord to come. That is Advent. That is

our religious experience. Our text today is Mark 13:35-37. "Watch therefore--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning--lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch." Vs. 33: "Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come."

We do not know when the Lord will come in triumph. We do not know when God will be victorious over the forces of evil. We do not know when the Lord will visit you and touch your life in a special way. We are like the servants who know their master will return, but they don't know when. We are like the ten maidens who await the coming of the bridegroom, but they don't know when. We live in the shadow of eternity. Barclay in his commentary on this passage writes:

That is no reason for fearful and hysterical expectation. But it does mean that day by day our work must be completed and done. It does mean that we must so live that it does not matter when He comes. It gives the great task in life of making every day fit for Him to see, and being at any moment ready to meet Him face to face. All life becomes a preparation to meet the King.

The children were presenting the Christmas play. To show the radiance of the Christ-child, an electric light bulb was hidden in the manger. All the stage lights were to be turned off so that only the brightness of the manger could be seen, but the boy who controlled the light got confused and turned out all the lights. It was a tense moment, broken only when one of the shepherds said in a loud stage whisper, "Hey! You switched off Jesus!" The warning to us this Advent is: Be on the alert. Don't switch off Jesus. Don't get so caught up in whatever that you miss the meaning of Christmas. Watch for his coming. Wait. Keep on the alert. Let me suggest three ways to wait, three ways to keep on alert.

First, live each day as if it were the last. Live each day in such a manner that it might be a suitable offering to God. Make each day a suitable gift for Christ. Keep your life fit for his coming, as you keep your house ready for company. I was told recently of a professor and his wife who invited colleagues to dinner. The guests of honor were the head of the department and his wife. Somehow the guests of honor got the time mixed up and arrived at the home one hour early. The hostess, nervous and frantic with last minute preparations, opened the door wearing an old housedress with her hair in curlers, to see her husband's boss on the steps. She gasped, exclaimed, "You can't come in yet!" and slammed the door in their faces. Then she really panicked. But, an hour later they came back, were very gracious, and everyone had a wonderful evening. Is your life in such order that if the Lord should come unexpectedly and knock on your door, you would be pleased to invite him in? Or, would you slam the door in his face? Keep on the alert!

Secondly, keep on the alert by listening. The Lord may be speaking to you. The art of listening to others is an art that requires attention and practice. Can you imagine how many beautiful experiences are missed because you aren't alert and aren't listening to what someone is really saying? The story is told that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt got tired of smiling that big smile and saying the usual things at all those White House receptions. So, one evening he decided to find out whether anyone was paying attention to what he was saying. As each person came up to him with extended hand, he flashed that big smile and said, "I murdered my grandmother this

morning." The people responded automatically with comments such as, "How lovely!" or "Just continue with your great work!" No one listened to the president except one foreign diplomat. When the president said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning," the diplomat responded softly, "I'm sure she had it coming to her."

Who knows all we've missed because we fail to listen! A test of how much you fail to hear is to ask yourself, "How often has someone really listened to me? Really heard what I was trying to say. Really heard and accepted my feelings, the words between the lines?" I suspect that experiences where you are really heard are rare. Some people are too busy to listen. Some people become threatened when you attempt to share a hurt, pain or frustration. Some people are reminded of their own pain when you share your pain. One way to be heard is first to listen. Do to others as you wish others to do to you.

When someone is sharing with you, listen to the words between the sentences. Listen to the underlying feeling being expressed. Listen to the pain or to the joy. When sharing and listening happen, an unexpected fellowship will result. God may be present. You might discover a depth to the relationship you never thought possible.

Thirdly, be on the alert this Advent for unexpected opportunities in unexpected places. Nancy Dahlberg tells of a Christmas her family experienced. They had spent the holidays in San Francisco with her husband's parents and were headed back to Los Angeles on Christmas Day.

They stopped for lunch in King City. The restaurant was nearly empty. She heard Erik, her one year old, squeal with glee: "Hithere!" (Two words he thought were one.) "Hithere." He pounded his fat baby hands on the metal high chair tray. His face was alive with excitement, eyes wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled, chirped, giggled and then she saw the source of his merriment.

A tattered rag of a coat--obviously bought by someone else eons ago--dirty, greasy and worn baggy pants, a spindly body, toes that poked out of would-be shoes, a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over and a face like none other with gums as bare as Erik's.

"Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster." The parents exchanged a look that was a cross between "what do we do?" and "poor devil." The meal came and the noise continued. Now the old bum was shouting from across the room: "Do you know patty cake? Atta boy...Do ya know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo!"

Erik, the baby, continued to laugh and answer, "Hithere." Every call was echoed. No one thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. The parents were embarrassed. Even the six-year-old asked, "Why is that man talking so loud?"

The father hurried to pay the check, imploring his wife to get Erik and meet him in the parking lot. She bolted for the door, hoping the man wouldn't speak. As she walked past him, she turned her back and Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted to his best friend, leaned over his mother's arms, and reached out his arms to the man.

ON THE ALERT!

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 15, 1985

As she came eye-to-eye with the old man, Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum's eyes and his mouth implored, "Would you let me hold your baby?" There was no need for her to answer since Erik propelled himself into the man's arms. Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship. Erik laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed and tears hovered beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain and hard labor gently, so gently, stroked the baby's back.

The mother stood awe-struck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik. Then the man's eyes opened and set squarely on the mother's. He said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby." Somehow she managed, "I will." As he handed Erik back to his mother, the man he said, "God bless you, ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift."

With Erik back in her arms, she ran for the car. Her husband wondered why she was crying, holding Erik so tightly, and saying, "My God, my God, forgive me."

Wait, watch, be on the alert, be ready. Who knows where you might find Christmas?