Be Alert and Pray

The Rev. David Jordan-Haas

The future fulfillment of God’s Kingdom, for Jesus, is about establishing God’s Kingdom right now!


The world as we know it was supposed to come to an END on December 21, 2012, wasn’t it? Wasn’t this what “End Times” experts predicted? An estimated $100 Million Dollars were spent on advertisements selling the “End of the World” hysteria. There was the husband and dad from Melbourne, Australia, Robert Bast, who spent $400,000 preparing for the end by stockpiling food, guns, generators, water purifiers, and solar powered equipment. Or, you could have put a quarter-million dollar down payment on a “Survival Bunker” out in the Arizona Desert, if you had wanted one. I had even heard that Nicolas Cage might be the next star to star in the next Left Behind movie! December 21st, 2012 came and went, and our God remains the same—yesterday, today, and forever.

Jesus was interested in End Times, too. But, unlike modern-day predictors, Jesus’ words about future happenings have more to do with how we are to live in the present! The future fulfillment of God’s Kingdom, for Jesus, is about establishing God’s Kingdom right now! It’s NOT about stockpiling fear or dread about the END; instead, it’s about sharing and spreading Christ’s mercy, hope, and grace now, in the present, to make for a better future.

This morning’s lesson puts us on the Tuesday of Holy Week. With palm branches waving, Jesus has already entered Jerusalem, on a donkey—not exactly to a hero’s welcome! The disciples are sensing change coming—big change in the near future. At the beginning of Luke’s 21st chapter, the disciples ask Jesus about the future; about when the end will come. Jesus talks about all sorts of signs and warnings—the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, persecution and judgment. Finally, Jesus reminds His disciples to get ready and watch, to be alert and to pray.

Luke 21:29-36 (from the Message) – Jesus told them a story, a parable. Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here—when you see these things happen, you know God’s kingdom is about here. (God’s Kingdom “is about here.” Bible scholar Dale Bruner names this as Jesus’ “any day now” scenario. In other words, we are living now in this “IN-
In His final days Jesus is charging us to be a “Ready People” – disciples who are at the top of their game, at peak performance… a Ready People.

This morning, I want us to zero-in on these last two admonitions by Jesus to His disciples – to “be alert at all times” and to “pray constantly”. What do these two look like for us? How do we go about doing these things, being alert and being in prayer?

TO BE ALERT AT ALL TIMES, or “don’t go to sleep at the switch.” Jesus makes it clear that we don’t know when He’ll return to put an end to sin and death. But we still must be in a state of ready expectancy for Him. There is good reason, good incentive, isn’t there, for wanting Jesus to return sooner rather than later? If we pause long enough and look at the state of the world, and think about it, aren’t we tired? Looking at this hurting world, at the root of it, aren’t we weary of the catastrophes, epidemics, the violence, pain, and abuse. Aren’t we tired of the brokenness in our lives, in our families, in our communities? We’re tired of losing those we love to disease, addiction, severe mental illness. At the root of it we want God to end this present age, and we want God to bring us into the age everlasting. We want God to bring us (sooner than later) into New Life, perfect Peace, pure Spirit. In this “In-Between” time, we wait, and yet we can’t wait. So, we try to stay awake and be alert for Christ’s “Any Day Now” Return.
So, be alert at all times, because Christ isn’t finished with us, even as we hope for His Coming Return.

Could it be that, in this “In-Between” time, while we’re still here, we realize that God isn’t through with us yet? Could it be that there is still time and that God is longing to grow us more, to liken us even more to Himself? While we’re still here and now, could it be that there is deeper “transformation” in store for us? So, be alert at all times, because Christ isn’t finished with us, even as we hope for His Coming Return. (Jeff Cook, Relevant, Jan/Feb 2013)

“What kind of people ought you to be?” the apostle Peter asks us in this “In-Between” time. Peter answers, “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (2 Peter 3:11-12). Spend these days being alert and “speeding Christ’s Coming,” in 3 ways. 1. Spend these days, Peter says, by living a Jesus-Life, bearing His fruits of loving-kindness, generosity, and joy. 2. Spend these days inviting others into this Jesus-Life, because there’s no other life like it! 3. Spend these present days, by your healthy habits and choices, building God’s future Kingdom now! Be at the top of your game, at peak performance.

But this can be tough. Most of us spend our days distracted by other pressing matters. I’m “on alert” about other things—that doctor’s appointment, running the kids around, groceries to get, bills to pay. Besides, I’m pretty satisfied in these “In-Between” days. “I’m not really in a hurry for Christ’s coming. I kind of like it just the way it is.”

The story tells of three apprentice devils that came to earth to complete their final test—to present to Satan (the Chief of all devils) his plan to tempt and ruin humankind. The first apprentice devil said to Satan, “I will tell them there is no God.” Satan replied, “That won’t deceive many at all, for they know there is a God.” The second young devil said to Satan, “I will tell them there is no hell,” but Satan replied, “You won’t fool anyone with that; people know there is a hell.” Finally, the third apprentice devil said to Satan, “I will tell them there is no hurry.” “Go,” said Satan, “and you will ruin them by the thousands!” There’s no hurry. Someone once said, “The most dangerous day in a man’s life is when he learns that there is such a word as tomorrow” (Barclay). You and I honestly just don’t know if tomorrow will ever come. There are things—like building a vital life in Christ, for Christ—which must not be put off.

Last October and November, some of you filled out the REVEAL Survey for us. We wanted to get a read on our “spiritual health” here at VPC. We wanted to gain some insights about our spiritual attitudes and behaviors. We found out that, as a church,
we’re not in too big a hurry to grow spiritually. Generally, we seem pretty satisfied with our level of spiritual satisfaction. Instead of becoming more “spiritually active,” we appear comfortable being “spiritually comfortable,” BOTH in our own individual lives and as a congregation. In His parable today, Jesus is inviting each of us (and our church) to wake up and to be alert.

Being alert at all times, and, second, “praying constantly.” Jesus is facing His final days; He’s talking to His disciples about End Times and He’s emphasizing prayer. He is emphasizing growing spiritually. Jesus is emphasizing to us becoming more and more like Him, so that when He’s gone we’ll still be here doing His Kingdom-Work in the world.

“How is it with your soul today?” Over 200 years ago, John Wesley used this question to develop a new way of being Christian. Wesley eventually called this new way “Methodism.” His followers would gather together in small groups. They’d get together and engage in the practices of prayer and care support and Bible study. They would get together and invest in keeping each other’s walk with Christ honest and real (Talitha Arnold, UCC Lent). At every gathering every person would be asked, “How is it with your soul today?” This “method” became a profound way of helping people GROW in their present relationship with Christ so that they’d be ready for Christ into the future.

We measure our lives in all sorts of ways—the hours we work, the money we make, the grades our kids bring home, the time we spend at the gym. But how do we measure the most important relationship of our lives, our life with Christ? So, how is it with your soul today? Have a method, a plan for growing and strengthening your soul. Get in a group. Pray and study together; care for each other; walk alongside each other in honest and real ways with God.

Some encouragement this morning. For some of us it might be really hard these days to be working hard on building a life with Christ, let alone securing a future with Christ into eternity. Let’s face it, some of us right now are feeling overwhelmed by what life has thrown at us. Life might be for you, right now, so heavy that you barely got out of bed and made it to church this morning. You’re anxious about your job, about finances, a hurting child, a breaking marriage, you’re really sad, or at a loss. Some of us are just plain worn out and in the wilderness in this present moment, in this hour, of this very day.

The thought of being alert at all times and praying constantly might seem like a distant, far reach, given that you (or someone you know) are just surviving, just getting by.
This God is with you, here and now, for forever and always, to comfort, strengthen, to hold you.

Good people, beloved people, the God of the Resurrection and Return is the same yester-day, today and to the end, into all eternity. In these “In-Between” times, the God who is walking with you hears you, and is faithful, right now and into forever. As the song goes, *You Are, I Am*, you can count on a God who conquers giants, who calls out kings, who shuts the mouths of lions, who tells the dead to breathe. This God is with you, here and now, for forever and always, to comfort, strengthen, to hold you. He is willing to walk with you through fire; our God takes the orphan’s hand—He takes your hand. God in Jesus takes your hand, in these living, growing, praying days, now, to the end of time, into the glory of eternity.