

Advent 1: HOPE - "Be Alert!"

Mark 13:24-37 [MW20-44]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Hakaru, Sunday 29 November 2020

Quite a few years ago now, before I was married

- there was a group of us, guys and girls, that used to go round together on a birthday or some other such auspicious occasion
- someone was given a card that read: Be a Lert! The world needs more Lerts!

[PP Slide][Picture]

Do you have any idea what a "Lert" is?

- I didn't then, not really
- but it all came back to me when I read the gospel for this Sunday the first Sunday of Advent
- where Jesus says: "Be on guard! Be alert!"
- I remembered the card, and the "lert" and I started thinking ...

And I thought perhaps the letters of "lert" - l, e, r, t, could stand for:

- Looks **E**ver **R**eady **T**o ...

Have you ever seen a "Lert"?

- neither have I
- but I'm guessing a "Lert" could maybe look like this ... [PP Slide][Picture]
- ready to take on anything, ready for any occasion, any situation, any eventuality ...

Dressed for business, with a flipper for water, a running shoe

- right length trousers for any occasion
- sunhat, sun cream, Polaroid sunglasses, free ear to listen out
- headphone radio to keep up with news and events
- skateboard for mobility, back pack for self-contained living
- umbrella for rain or sun, binoculars to see what's going on
- athletic singlet for sprints or a marathon, stopwatch
- mobile phone and pager, special knee-pads for protection and praying
- Swiss army knife – very handy gadget, free hand – very important
- snorkel, you never know when you might need one
- note the life belt, keep you afloat anywhere

If you ever see one of these characters, please let me know

- I think there's an opening in our church for someone with all these skills!

Jesus says: "Be alert!"

- let's see if any of you are alert: what's this (Show watch)?
- excellent; by the way, that's also the title some people give to this passage of Mark's gospel: "Watch!"
- but you don't actually need a watch to know that the time is four Sundays before Christmas and we call this time "Advent"
- a time to get ready, a time to prepare
- a time to look forward to celebrating a great event

Now, if you don't have a watch, or don't wear one – how can you tell the time?

- look for some signs to give you a clue
- and here this morning there are some signs
- have you noticed them? [purple, wreath and candles, tree]

Have you perhaps noticed other signs of Christmas over the past week or so?

- all around us there are signs that “something” is going to happen something pretty big
- the commercial world begins its preparations long before the church does! much money time and energy goes into these signs to let us know something that is not ordinary is going to happen!
- SOON!

Jesus says: “Be on watch! Be alert!”

- Jesus uses the word ‘watch’ five times in four verses so it must be a pretty important word
- how many meanings are you aware of for “watch”? my dictionary lists 16 – I’ll read you a couple

“Watch”

The act of keeping awake, especially to protect or guard; close observation for a time, as to find out something; to be looking or waiting attentively; to observe carefully and constantly; to keep informed about

Have any of you ever been “on watch”?

- in the armed forces on guard or sentry duty; or on a ship? what is the incentive to watch in these cases?
- not get in trouble, protect people, enemy attack, ship not run into problems and what are you not, NOT, **NOT** allowed to do?
- fall asleep and miss something!

Our incentive as Christians perhaps incorporates some of these elements

- but our real incentive is ...HOPE our incentive to keep watch is the hope Jesus brought into the world and that we are preparing to celebrate
- our incentive to keep watch is the hope that Jesus is returning again in glory and in power

This hope is the our reason for the watch season we call “Advent”

- as usual, we will light a candle each Sunday of Advent as we ‘count down’ to Christmas
- this first Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of Hope

[candle is lit while prayer is said]]

Time seems to rush;

We do the things that must be done.

But we are tired;

There are so many whose needs are so great.

But finally comes hope –

The way hope always comes:

A child.

People who walk in darkness

Shall see a great light.

We who dwell in a land of shadows,

On us has light shined.

As we light our first Advent candle,

*the candle of hope – we pray: Come, Lord Jesus! **Amen.***

Jesus in the gospel talks of a doorkeeper

- I have an image of a 'night watchman' [PP Slide]
anyone here done that job?
- a night watchmen work while other people are relaxing or sleeping
they make sure no one creeps in unexpectedly
- their job is to make sure no one makes off unnoticed, with something precious

The image of a doorkeeper or night watchman is important

- because Jesus arrived in a way no one expected
not many people even noticed did they?
- many people were expecting God's Messiah
but they were not expecting it the way it happened
- they didn't see the signs, they weren't prepared, they were not ready
and so they missed out when Jesus came
- they had their expectations of how they thought God would act
and they were not prepared to change them

We've been warned about this, we know this

- but we need to be constantly reminded
God acts in ways far beyond our imagining
yet always remains loving and gracious in revealing himself to us

One writer puts it like this:

*I looked for God for a long time,
a game of hide and seek
in the dark
with God hidden
and me the seeker,
I thought.
But now I see it was
a game of lost and found
(and God was not the one lost).
God finding me
was how I found God
after looking for a long time
in all the wrong places.*

(Lynne Locke)

Jesus says: "Watch! Be on guard!"

- because you do not know when the master of the house is coming
if you knew when and how an enemy was going to attack
you wouldn't need guards or sentries ...
- if you knew when a thief was going to break in
night watchmen would be redundant

That's the whole point though

- we don't know, we just don't know
Jesus' return is going to be like that
- as unexpected as his birth
and even better news
- there are signs for those who look
so Jesus tells us: "Watch!" [PP Slide]

So, what do you watch for at this time of year ... ?

Let me tell you a few of the things I watch for

- I watch for the commercialism of Christmas
- I notice events that happen
and watch for the motivating spirit behind them
- I watch for changed lives
as people really take on board what Christmas is all about for them
- I watch for people who come to church for the first time
or the first time in years
- I watch to see what's going to be on TV
to see if the 'real' Christmas message of Jesus' birth and God's love
and new hope and new life get a look in
- I watch for families getting together
- I watch for signs of reconciliation, between people and nations
- I watch for this time of year to spur actions of goodwill and generosity
- I watch for people who are lonely, or sad, or forgotten
people who need extra help to be able to celebrate Christmas
- I watch especially for hope to be fulfilled once again
as it was that very first Christmas

Jesus says to you, to me, to each and every one of us: "Watch!"

- watch for the surprise of Christmas
watch for the surprise of Christmas
- you know children have no problem with that do they?!
they always hope and expect at Christmas
- are you hoping for anything this Christmas?
nah, of course not, you're adults, you're beyond that
you've grown up and have a more mature outlook don't you!

But if you're not hoping and expecting

- it makes it much harder to find the surprise of Christmas
perhaps that's why we have this 'lead up' time we call Advent
- to remind us 'biggies' and 'oldies' and adults
to have hope, to get excited
- perhaps we need this time because we're "harder to start"
we take time to 'warm up'
- perhaps we need this time to gear ourselves up to celebrate, really celebrate
what Christmas is all about

What is it all about? I'll leave you with these thoughts from George White:

Watch your step. You are approaching a dangerous manger. It also serves as a makeshift baby bed. Beware, for the one you seek did not stay a baby. Jesus, nursed and cuddled by Mary, later claimed everyone who does God's will as his mother. Jesus, worshipped by shepherds, later challenged us not to seek lost sheep, but lost people. Jesus, given gifts by wise ones who had travelled from afar, called us to go out of our way to care for the hungry, the lonely, and the homeless. Watch your step as you take this Bethlehem baby in your arms and whisper to him. You may find him taking you into his arms, whispering new life into you.

Jesus says: Watch! Be alert!

- be a lert: be someone who
Looks Ever Ready To
- seek, share and celebrate the surprise of Christmas! [give out "Lerts"]



BE A LERT

THE WORLD NEEDS MORE LERTS.

