

More Lerts! Mark 13:24-37

Pastor Bill Mosley 11/29/2020

It was Christmas day of 1983, a cold gray day, and hardly anyone was at the meat packing plant where I was a security guard. I sat at the back gate where most days the employees streamed in and out wearing their rubber boots and white frock coats. My job was to see that no one carried out meat or tools or anything else of value that did not belong to them. Usually I looked in lunch boxes and checked badges and on payday I had to compare receipts with packages of meats they were taking home to their families.

But on Christmas Day they were all at home. I was not. I had to work. I had brought along books to read, paper to write on, a radio to listen to, a lunch to eat, pecans to shell, and hot tea in a thermos. As usual at most guard posts, there was an old sign posted that said, "be alert." Also as usual, someone had long ago written below that message, "*America needs more lerts!*"

I don't know what a "lert" is, but it sounds terrible.

Most days the employees would hang around the gate on their breaks, talking to each other, and sometimes to me. They all knew I was a counselor and pastor, and sometimes someone would want to talk religion, or even talk over their problems. But on Christmas Day, there was no one there and the parking lot was empty. Or almost.

The two or three cars there meant there were a few maintenance engineers on duty. One of them came out on his way home. He was wearing a jacket, & it was cool. The gray skies made it seem cold, & the day & loneliness made it seem colder than it was.

As he opened his lunch box he talked nervously. Unusual for him. I thought something might be bothering him, so I indicated that I would listen as long as he needed someone to talk to, and then suddenly he didn't want to talk. I walked with him through the gate to his car. All this time I had a creepy feeling and I was just putting off acting on it.

So I said, "I'll have to see what's under your jacket."

It was really dumb. Just a couple of wheels off a cart or a lawnmower, but they were contraband. And the fellow babbled for about 20 minutes about losing his job and it was Christmas and I shouldn't do this to him. He begged me to give him another chance.

I felt awful. But I wrote him up anyway. It was his job or mine. I found out later that the wheels might not have been much, but they were enough. People in the plant had been watching him for a long time, but hadn't been able to catch him. One engineer said he thought he had lost about \$200 in tools to this character and he was glad to see him go. But he wasn't there to tell me that on Christmas Day. I had to be alert. And what I had to do made me feel like a lert.

It was a terrible, horrible, no good feeling.

The message for the Kingdom of God today is be alert, and avoid having to feel like a lert. This is a wakeup call for us. We need to be alert, vigilant, watchful, waiting for Christ's coming kingdom.

On top of deer season, it's the Christmas season. In ordinary times it's busiest time of year. Besides hunting, there are the parties to attend, cookies to bake, decorations to put up, gifts to buy, cards and notes to send, donations to make, and on and on it goes. By Christmas Day we are exhausted.

Maybe not so much this year, if we're not doing so much of those things with COVID.

In the midst of all this endless hoopla we enter the somber season of Advent. Advent seems out of sync with the festive activities going on all around us. Like a book sometimes begins with a preface or forward, the church year opens with a pre-season -- the season of advent. The world is already talking about the beginning, the birth of Jesus. The church, instead, is talking about the end.

Advent is a season of preparation. It is a time to look both to the future and back to the past. We look forward to Christ's coming again as we remember and celebrate his birth long ago. Jesus promised the Apostles that one day he would return. They asked the same question that every generation since has asked, "When will these things be?"

Mark 13 collects some sayings of Jesus concerning the Day of the Lord, the end of time, judgment day. The point is given three times -- you might want to underline them: watch, keep awake, keep alert.

If only we knew exactly when Christ will return we could pencil him into our busy schedules. If only we knew when, we could clean up our lives so we would be ready. The problem is that we do not know. While we can count the days until Christmas we cannot count the number of days until Christ will return. In fact Jesus warns us about people who try.

The word from Jesus is to keep alert. We do not know when he will establish his kingdom on earth. No one does. "About that day or hour," Jesus says, "no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Notice that even Jesus himself did not know the day or time but only God the Father. Jesus did not want his followers to waste time speculating. We have work to do.

Jesus told a story about a man who was about to leave for an extended trip. Since he was traveling a good distance, he was unsure when he would return. It could be in 10 days or 10 months or even 10 years. He didn't know. Whenever he returned, though, he expected to find his house in order. One of the servants was given the job of doorkeeper. It was his responsibility to keep watch, like a security guard. Since the doorkeeper didn't know when the master would return, he had to stay awake. He had to keep watch. He could not allow himself to become engrossed with other activities. If the master returned and found the doorkeeper asleep, he would be in serious trouble.

The question is, will you be ready when you see "the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory"? And what will you be doing?

If you are not ready, you might feel like a lert. Being ready means we get our lives in order so that we can be alert, rather than feel like a lert.

The maintenance man at the back gate of the meat packing plant wanted to know how I could do such a thing to him on Christmas day. I was taking his job away, he said. He had a family to support, and this would ruin his Christmas. I said, you knew it was Christmas when you tried to steal from your employer. How could you do that on Christmas? The day didn't matter much. Getting caught was his wake-up call. Maybe he wanted to get caught.

Jesus' words about his return weren't meant to frighten people. Instead his words were meant as words of comfort. We know how the story ends. We can relax. We do not have to wait until some far-off time to connect ourselves to him. He is here for us now. Be alert. Delay does not mean he is not coming. He is merely giving us time to get our lives together. Enter into his kingdom today.

Lord, keep us alert, saying no to whatever makes it more difficult to say yes to you. 1306 words