

BE ALERT

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, AUGUST 11, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

LUKE 12:32-40

As most of you know, my wife, Polly, is down at our place in rural DeSoto County, recuperating from some minor foot surgery.

She had a little excitement this week. In fact, our whole little corner of the county had some excitement. Sheriff's deputies from the county to the north chased a car load of men suspected of armed robbery and attempted murder across the county line and into the area where our place is. They tried to turn on to a side road, went into a deep ditch, and only one man escaped. But he did escape, and ran away into the woods and orange groves that are a part of that neighborhood.

A massive search was launched. Helicopters flew over. The tracking dogs from the state prison were called in. Deputies and neighbors patrolled the roads all night long.

And the whole community was on high alert. Polly spent two nights with her friend Henry in the bed with her. Henry is a .22 caliber lever action rifle. She's a pretty good shot, and I wouldn't have wanted to be the person attempting to break in to our little ranch house.

The search was abandoned after it was concluded that the man had eluded the searchers and left the area.

Unfortunately, the person who knows those woods and orange groves best, and could have led the search on horseback was up here in Marianna serving as your interim pastor.

There are times when we are more alert than others. Having a criminal loose in the neighborhood is one of those.

Our U.S. Embassies overseas have been on high alert lately, many even closed for business, because of a perceived terrorist threat.

There is nothing like the threat of danger to make one alert.

I think it was my long-time favorite cartoonist Gary Larson who first said, "Be a lert. The world needs more lerts."

Note that in our text this morning, Jesus not only tells us to be alert, he tells us "Do not be afraid."

Time and time again, Jesus tells his disciples, his listeners, "Fear not." Here, Jesus says, "Fear not, little flock for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

A colleague of mine once told me at a Presbytery meeting that she admired my courage. I asked her what she meant. She said, "You are totally fearless. You refuse to let anyone intimidate you." Well, I guess she'd been watching me for enough years to learn that I don't know the meaning of the word fear. But there are lots of words I don't know the meaning of!

If I am not afraid, it is because I take Jesus at His word I'd never thought about it as courage, as fearlessness, as refusing to be intimidated. It is faith to me, faith that the God whom I love and serve will take care of me, and will keep the promises that have been made to me.

You see, we Presbyterians are the people who have a statement of faith that begins and ends with the assurance that in life and in death, we belong to God. I'm living in God's kingdom, under God's reign, right now. I will be forevermore. My everlasting life has already begun, and the death of this body will just be a part of the life I will live forevermore. And I won't have to go to God to live that life, because God is already here with me, every day. God is present as the Holy Spirit. God is present in Immanuel, Jesus, the Christ, and God is present as the Creator of the splendor I behold in a rainbow or a sunrise, or a hummingbird or a new-born calf.

The teachings of Jesus here in Luke are abbreviated versions of longer teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, among other places in Matthew and from Mark's gospel.

But the point is the same: Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit, be prepared, be alert.

Remember that Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids? That begins the wonderful chapter of parables of the kingdom that is Matthew 25. Obviously, the audience in Luke's gospel had heard the teaching and knew it. They knew that the ones who are prepared would be admitted to the banquet when the bridegroom came, and the unprepared, those who were not alert, would be left outside.

The teaching here is blessed are those servants whom the master will find alert when he comes.

And the metaphor is still the heavenly banquet. Luke wrote that Jesus said that the master will fasten his belt, and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. At the Last Supper, in the Upper Room, Jesus girded Himself with a towel, and served the apostles who sat at the table, washing their feet as a servant would, giving them the loaf and the cup.

And Jesus adds, if he comes in the middle of the night or at dawn, blessed are those servants who are ready.

He concludes the teaching by saying, "If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into."

Now I guarantee Polly was not the only person on alert the nights that escapee was at large in the Bunker community of rural DeSoto County.

The problem with being alert is that we can only maintain our alertness for a short time. We forget to be alert. Oh, we used to have air raid warnings. I woke up in the middle of the night to the television blaring a warning signal the other night. I'd left it on, and it was time for one of those periodic checks of the system.

Being alert means living as though Jesus could come at any moment. And for some folks, that's tough.

But for me, and I'd say for most of us who are Christians, at least most of us who are the Presbyterian brand of Christian, the realization is that we are already living in His kingdom.

He's already here, and we are already with Him, and in a real sense, that is what old C.H. Dodd wrote about in his theory of "realized eschatology", which simply stated means that the kingdom that is coming is the kingdom that is already here.

He sing about it in Handel's Messiah: it comes straight out of the Book of Revelation 11:15-19: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever. King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

When Jesus finished, Peter asked, "Lord, are you telling us this parable for us or for everyone?" And that led Jesus to tell yet another parable.

But I think Peter learned the lesson of being alert. In His first epistle, he wrote: "Be alert; your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

Now, on the one hand, we can watch for the devil, watch for the temptations that Satan offers, and on the other, we can watch for the Coming of the Lord. Truth is, they are both already here, and we just have to have the ability the alertness, to know the difference.

So be a lert. The world needs more lerts. The world needs more people who can see the devil, and point him out, and who can see the Lord, and point the way to Him. Be a lert.

Let us pray:

Lord, help us to watch and pray. To see Satan and sin and reject both, and to see your Way and your will and follow. Amen and amen.