



(Sanctus bells rung) Come, Lord Jesus. Enter our hearts with the light of your love. Strengthen our faith as we are reminded that you are coming, that you are already here, and that you will be with us this day and forever more. Amen.

Keep awake! Watch! You do not know the day or the time. Keep awake. We live in an in-between time. The time between the first coming of Jesus as human being and the time when Jesus will come again. Advent is the classic “both/and.” We do not know the time or the hour or the day. Jesus reminds us to keep awake and to watch. This is not a passive sit in your recliner and watch, though. It is an active, get out into the world and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the ill life.

Jesus tells us that we are not to sit passively waiting for someone to come rescue us. He tells us that “it is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.”

While we wait for Jesus – both the renewal of the story of his birth as a baby in a manger and the return at the end of the age- we are to keep awake- to be alert. To be out and about doing the work we have been called to do. It might be as the man going on a journey- somewhere specific to do something necessary. It might be as one of the slaves, each with work to do. Or we might be the doorkeeper- the one who first gives notice of changes at the entrance to the household.

Most of the definitions of “alert” reference anticipation of something bad or wrong. They include: an attitude of vigilance, readiness, or caution, as before an expected attack. Alert, though, also means “fully awake, attentive, keen, swift, agile and nimble.”¹ This second group of terms to define alert, or watch, seems closer to what Jesus likely meant. Focus or being intentional about where you place your attention is more in line with Jesus’s instruction to do

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/alert> (Nov. 29, 2014)

Isaiah 64: 1-9; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13:24-37

our work while we wait for both the birth of Jesus as human being and for the return of Jesus at the end of the age.

Keeping watch for an extended period of time is hard, though. The record is 11 days for a teenager who was working on a science project. Not recommended but possible. The downside is that the longer you stay awake, the less you are aware and the less well you function. That's one reason why navies have watches of specific duration- often a 4 or 6 hour segment. It's the why of the term "ship's bells."

(Sanctus bells rung) The bells signify something is changing. To be alert or watchful. On a ship it is to note the changing of the watch or the time within a particular watch segment. At a church- the outside bell is rung to signal the beginning or the end of a service. An audible reminder that we are about to begin something important. "Watch" in this case is both visual and audible.

Inside the church, Sanctus bells are traditionally rung when the Holy Spirit is petitioned to be present during the consecration and when the host – bread or wine- is lifted. It's not something we Episcopalians do very often, although in "high church" parishes it may be part of every Sunday worship.

The Sanctus bells- symbolizing the "holy, holy, holy"- are an audible reminder to those inside the nave that something important is happening. We are to "be awake and watch" as we proceed with the Eucharist- the giving of thanks for all that God has given to us.

Patricia de Jong writes that "our country has changed from one that wants to **do** good to one that wants to **feel** good."²² She wonders if this is partly what is behind the "Black Friday" madness and opening stores earlier and earlier to buy things. The company Rosetta Stone asks if having another TV will make you better or happier – or if learning another language will make you a better or happier person. Of course, their claim is that learning another language is the correct answer to that question. In a bit of a chuckle, though, they too participated in Black Friday sales with a special price on their products.

Recent events here and across the world suggest that we have gone off-track in terms of human relationships and an understanding that God is love, that we are each created by God and worthy of dignity and respect.

This last week alone has seen burnings, looting and destruction of communities because some people did not get the Grand Jury verdict they felt necessary in the Ferguson, Missouri incident. Among the things that make me sad about this response is that property is being destroyed that is integral to the very community at issue. I've never understood how destroying your own neighborhood and the livelihood of your neighbors advances the wellbeing of all. I've never understood how riots and destruction serve to change a justice system that the people rioting feel isn't working.

²² Patricia de Jong in Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 2.

Similarly, the overturning of the Ray Rice suspension carries with it the headline "NFL is not serious about domestic violence." Does the overturning of the suspension mean that the NFL is not serious about dealing with domestic violence or does it reflect an overstepping of the provisions in place to deal with situations such as those involving Ray Rice? I see a conflating of two issues into headlines that grab attention and do not deal with the underlying need for change, both in individual human beings and in organizations. My hope is that the NFL will rewrite its rules and regulations to offer an ability to deal effectively and appropriately with behavior that no one ought to condone.

Internationally we have only to look at Nigeria bombing that killed at least 100 and injured many more. Another example of violence that all too often escalates rather than solving anything.

Peter Kassig's parents said this following the November 16th beheading of their son: "Our hearts are battered, but they will mend. The world is broken, but it will be healed in the end. And good will prevail as the one God of many names will prevail."³

Advent is a time to be alert and to watch. To consider how the work we have been given to do advances the realm of God here on earth as we also look towards the realm of God in heaven. We are a "both/and" people.

Rev. DeJong also reminds us that "when we try to stem our hurt and pride by running away from pain and caring only about what is ours. We cannot create peace through selfishness but only by opening ourselves to hope. Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes from a broken heart willing to be mended. We do not lose heart [during Advent or listening to news stories such as the ones mentioned above]. Rather we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world."⁴

Give thanks for the love and grace of God, in and through Jesus Christ, that encourages us to be alert to the many ways in which God is present in the world. Give thanks that we live in a country where we can go about our work during this Advent season preparing the way for God's return- both as a baby in a manger and at the end of the age.

In thanksgiving for all that God has gifted us with, even as we live in a broken world that is so often disheartening, let us turn in our Book of Common Prayer to page 836 and the General Thanksgiving. Let us pray together:

³ <http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/53377/20141127/peter-kassig-s-parents-forgive-isis-killers-beheading-son.htm#ixzz3KTcuh8xr> (November 29, 2014)

⁴ DeJong in Feasting, 4, 6.

Isaiah 64: 1-9; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love.

We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side.

We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.

We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.

Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he overcame death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom.

Grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know him and make him known; and through him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to you in all things. *Amen.*

(Sanctus bells rung; silence)