

“People Get Ready”

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Mark 13:24-37 + return of Jesus

Frederick Buechner in a widely read sermon speaks of a Christmas Eve worship service he attended at St. Peter's basilica in Rome.¹



Buechner describes the crowds, the hours of waiting, the impromptu carols that broke out like brush fires, the magnificent setting. There was a hush as the Swiss guards finally carried in Pope Pius XII on his golden throne.



Buechner felt the aging Pope's eyes burn into the crowd, searching intently, almost face by face, looking for someone. Someone he longed to see but did not find that night. The Pope's intent searching, Buechner believes, is characteristic – the characteristic of our post-Christian age.

Buechner's world of the late 1960's "was reeling from the aftermath of two World Wars, the ongoing horrors of Vietnam, the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the threat of nuclear annihilation." What Pope Pius XII was searching for, what our broken world is earnestly searching for is "the ghost at least of Christ."

We long not just for the ghost of Christ past, but even more for the return of our Lord Jesus the Messiah in glory and power. As we prepare ourselves to commemorate the birth of Jesus, we look for – we long for – we hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God's realm in Christ.

We want Jesus to come again as promised – we want the consummation of the age.



Jesus' words to us from scripture:

- to "beware." Fifteen times in Mark, five times in chapter 13 alone.
- to "keep awake." Six times in Mark, three times in this chapter alone.

- to "keep alert." Only once in all of Mark, and where? You guessed it. In our text today.

Jesus offers us good counsel: live ready, live prepared – *beware, keep awake, keep alert.*

True story from my congregation in Dallas:

Bryanna, the six year old, asked her mom, "What's a lert?"

"A what?" her mother asked.

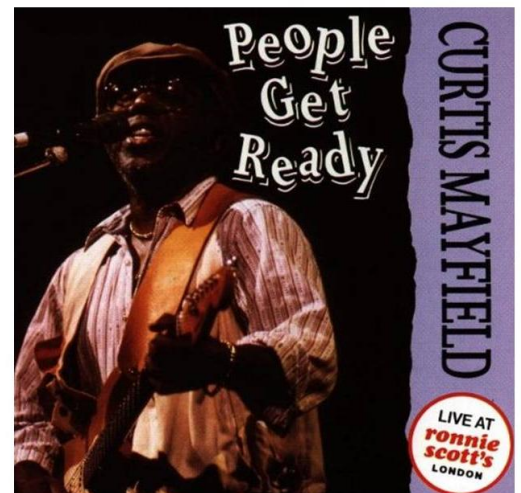
"A lert?" she said again.

"Why do you want to know?" asked her bewildered mother.

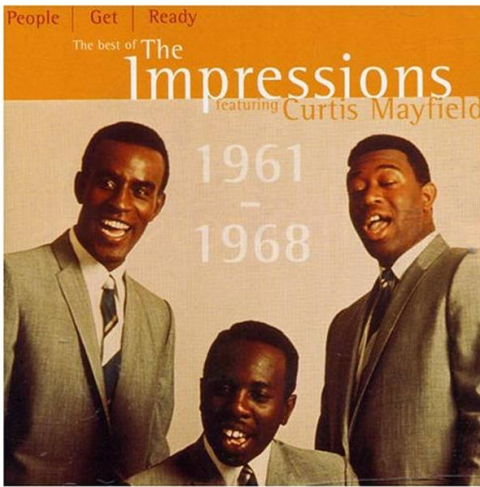
"Because my Sunday School teacher said that we should 'be a lert,' so I want to know what a lert is, so I can be one?"

Jesus tells us, commands us to be always ready, ever prepared – always *alert.*

Curtis Mayfield came from a long line of church folk. His grandmother was an itinerate preacher. Curtis Mayfield wrote the well known song "People Get Ready." He wrote it originally as a Gospel song. He like so many others, including Johnny Cash, started out in the Gospel genre.



The Impressions were impressed (no pun intended) with “*People*



Get Ready” but they requested a change in a couple of lines to make it secular. “God gave me my strength” in the original became “I’ve got my strength.” and the rest, as they say, is history. The song became a crossover hit propelling the Impressions and Curtis Mayfield beyond Motown, beyond Gospel to popular stardom and a broad audience.

*People get ready, there’s a train a-coming
You don’t need no baggage -
you just get on board.*

“People get ready” is good counsel. A common theme in popular music – other songs of the same era having this theme would include Creed’s “*Are You Ready?*” and Three Dog Night’s “*Eli’s coming.*”

“People get ready” is good counsel ~ Jesus’ counsel. We long for release. We long for justice. We long for God’s reign to finally become. We want to be ready! But will we be? or will our impatience get the better of us – our impatience at the seeming delay of Christ’s return? It has been 2000 years of waiting after all.

Red owl’s grandmother, a native American wise woman, say this of impatience:

We native Americans have a great advantage over whites. It is very easy to bargain with them, for they think time is important.

Our impatience is our downfall. In something as mundane as simple marketing in Indonesia, we discovered the same thing. In Indonesian markets, there were no fixed prices.

Haggling over price is an art, an important social activity. We Westerners were never able to get as low a price by bargaining as our Indonesian friends and colleagues would.



My colleagues finally let us know why – it was on account of we Westerners thought time, our own time, was important. We were too impatient to take time to do a simple activity like grocery shopping. We Westerners really do live by Franklin’s adage, “time is money.”



To bargain well one has to let go of the idea that the goal of the transaction is the transaction. We must learn to think of everything, time included in a different way – in Jesus’ way. We have to learn patience by entering a timeless realm, God’s realm, where our time and the other persons’ time is rendered into an art ~ the art of

relationship-making ~ the art of making a pastime out of chronological time. It all becomes an oasis out of time where human relationships are of infinite more value than the time spent.

To wait well you have to let go of time. To wait for God’s reign and Jesus’ return is just like that ~ we have to leave chronological time behind. We have to enter God’s timeless realm, where past and future and present have no meaning ~ where there is nothing but our relationship with God.

A timeless realm where what was – Jesus’ life, death and resurrection – and what will be – Jesus’ return in power and glory – are not distant murmurs but fully part of the present, impinging on our present, informing our lives right now.



Yes, we whites, we Westerners, think time is important. “Time is money” means “time” has value for us. But time, God’s time, renders our counting time ~ our making time ~ our keeping time ~ our passing time ~ renders it unimportant.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California speaks eloquently about surfing in his popular book *The Purpose Driven Church* of the skills required to catch a wave, ride a wave, dismount safely from a wave. But Rick Warren points out we may ride a wave, but we cannot make a wave. Only God makes the waves. Our job is to patiently wait for God's waves – and to be ready to catch them when they come in God's time.



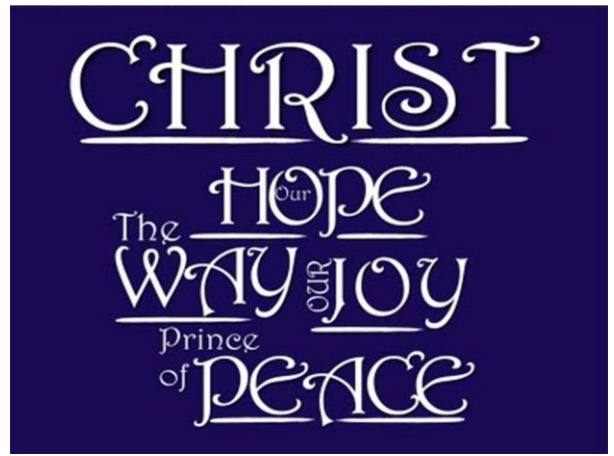
Interestingly enough, the best waves are during the greatest storms. In times of great crisis come the greatest opportunities for God's plan to become. The political crisis of 1965 in Indonesia provided a storm in which the Christian community was propelled to hundredfold growth.

When it comes to opportunities to work for God's reign, there is nothing like the present for crises. No less, perhaps more, than Buechner's world of the late 1960's, we are challenged on almost every front. We still haven't healed over Vietnam. We still have a hard time differentiating between ill-conceived wars and the honors due the worthy warriors coming home broken and in need of our help – and our respect. We still mourn the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.



We are still challenged even ten years after with post-9/11 angst and continuing fear. We are challenged with venomous national debates, anger filled political campaigns, bitter church splits, challenged by wars and rumors of wars, of terror attacks abroad and the need for continuous vigilance against attacks at home.

We are challenged by an economy with continuing unemployment and weakness – with a shrinking middle class, growing poverty and greater concentration of wealth at the top 1%; and with sharp competition from abroad. What Pope Pius XII was searching for, what our broken world is hungering and thirsting for this Christmas is “the ghost at least of Christ.” We are challenged by personal crises of vast variety. All God’s waves in stormy times.



We live in fearful times, just like Jesus prophesied – and every generation of Christian has faced, is facing and will face fearful conditions. The question is not how we may escape from these conditions, how we may fly from the world to a heaven which does indeed await us. But rather the only real question is how we respond to the waves, and what we do ride them out. Will the political crises here in the USA in 2011 propell our Christian community into even tenfold growth? Into any growth at all?



God’s waves, they can harm us – dash us against the rocks – or if we are ready, the poor in spirit and the meek, if we take Jesus at his word, we can ride the waves over the rocks into God’s realm.

To re-Gospelize Curtis Mayfield’s song from our text today:

*People get ready, there’s a **storm** a-coming
You don’t **have to worry** -
you just get on board.*

¹ Frederick Buechner, “*The Hungering Dark*”