The CATHEDRAL of ST. PHILIP
SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

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At Midnight There Was A Shout!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 27, Year A

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25:1-13)

At midnight, there was a shout!
…Keep awake…
—Matthew 25:6,13

At midnight, there was a shout! I remember it well. Some of you're here today remember it, too. It was late, late at night, on a Sunday, the last day of November, 2014, twelve years ago. Sundays are long days for most of us who serve churches. Sundays are glorious, but they consume a lot of energy. By Sunday night, we are ready for sleep. By 11:30 pm that night, I was sound asleep.

Suddenly, our home telephone started ringing. Well, we had stopped answering that landline years before; I let it ring. But, then my cell phone start ringing, too. I answered it. It was a faithful colleague, Wallace Marsh, the priest who was living in the cathedral residence at the time, right next to the church.

"Sam," he said, "we've got a problem." Well, of course we must have had a problem; otherwise, he would never have been calling me at that hour. Furthermore, I am usually the last resort, the last person anyone wants to call!

In my bed, having just been waked up, I was still in a dark stupor. Something was weird. I could hear a strange sound in the distance, something that sounded like a tornado warning. Then, I realized the horrifying disaster. I looked over at my wife, Boog, and exclaimed, reluctantly, "Those are the cathedral bells I hear!"

Yes, it was 11:30 at night, and the cathedral tower bell system had malfunctioned. Remember: we do have real bells in our tower, but we don't use ropes. The bells are controlled electronically. The bells were ringing –loudly, as if proclaiming something; but I knew that no one would be happy.

I put on some clothes and rushed to the church. The ever-faithful David Rocchio and Wallace Marsh were already here. They were downstairs, right over there in the main sacristy control room, turning off every switch they could find! But to no avail. Meanwhile, on our cell phones, they and I were receiving all sorts of Facebook inquiries, Twitter messages, and phone calls: "What's up with the bells?" "Do you guys over there know the bells are ringing?"

Yes, we knew. The whole neighborhood knew. "At midnight, there was a shout!"

Now, on a holy occasion, I like the peal of our bells. Our policy is not to ring the bells to mark regular time, like

on the hour or one the half hour. We ring the bells only on holy times. At weddings, funerals, after Sunday services, they are glorious. As our neighbors know, however, our bells are meant to sound beautifully during the day, not during the night. That night, with all the city so quiet, those bells were tremendously loud and incessant, everywhere. It was not a happy time, made even more daunting when we figured out that the circuit breaker box which directly controls the bells is in the very top of the cathedral bell tower.

Have any of you ever climbed the bell tower? I see some of you out there, who have! If you have, you know that our tower is not a lovely and easy tourist attraction. It was not designed to be ascended by the public. The journey starts from way back there in the back balcony! Part of the journey is along the roof over a side aisle. It involves climbing four different ladders. And the last forty feet, straight up, is on the scariest ladder of all!

Now, have any of you made that journey at midnight? It is a scramble, not easy, even during the day! David Rocchio and I had done it during the day, but twelve years ago, we did it at midnight. Yes, the trusty David Rocchio and I did it with flashlights. And in record time, too!

We had no idea what we were looking for, and so we pulled open every electrical box we could find along the way. Finally, we were in the top chamber, at the very top, right next to the bells themselves. IT WAS LOUD! Even after finding the correct box and flipping every switch, we couldn't tell whether we had switched off the right one, because the bells take so long to stop swinging! Together, they weigh over five thousand pounds. We knew it would take some time before they stopped swinging.

Did I mention that they were loud? And that we were right next to them? We were frantic, and we were hopeful. We were deaf, and we were communicating with hand signals. Finally, after a few minutes that felt like a few hours, we realized, "Okay, Okay, I think the swinging is slowing down." Thanks be to God! That moment was my moment of Thanksgiving that year!

It was not a moment of Cathedral excellence or of Cathedral hospitality, but it sure was a moment of Cathedral grace. We spent the next several days apologizing profusely to our neighbors, who mostly accepted the event gracefully. The Cathedral of St. Philip is a huge, and complex place – and a complicated one. Usually we get things right, and sometimes something goes wrong.

Thus, at any moment of any day, our Cathedral community is being called to be prepared. It takes work. It takes effort. Even when we are asleep at night, like bridesmaids maybe, with oil in our lamps, we have to be prepared. Even when we are asleep at night, we have to be prepared. At midnight, there might be a shout!

Now, our gospel for today, and our gospel that Sunday twelve years ago, is known for these great words at the end: "Keep awake!"

I like those words. I think Jesus means: if we are awake and alert, and paying attention, we might just see amazing grace in the crazy world around us these days. If we are awake and alert and mindful, we can experience the wonderful presence of God in the most ordinary of events. Even in the most scary or painful events, we can experience the holiness of God.

But I think those words mean something else, too. They mean being prepared. There is no way that any true human being can literally stay awake all the time. We need sleep. Like those bridesmaids in today's parable needed sleep. Both the wise and the foolish needed sleep. On that Sunday twelve years ago, we, too, needed to be asleep.

So, staying awake, spiritually, means another thing. It means being prepared. Staying awake means being prepared. That night, for instance, twelve years ago, was certainly a crisis, but there was no way we resolved it simply by staying up all night and waiting for it.

No, the way we had prepared for it, maybe unknowingly, was by having climbed those stairs before. By knowing something about our electrical system and circuit breaker boxes. By being able to use cell phones with each other in the middle of the night. By having worked together already, and trusting each other. That was the oil that we had taken the time to accumulate, the oil that we would need for our lamps in a time of crisis. It was the oil of preparation.

The way to prepare for crises is to pay attention to human relationships and complicated physical challenges before something goes wrong. Before something goes wrong! That's the way to stay awake.

You know, it may be that most of us do know what to do during crises. We jump into action and try to be the solution.

Indeed, that may be why some of us like to create crises. Have you noticed people around us who actually like to create crisis? That is usually because they want to see themselves as savior. They want the adulation of having solved a crisis, so they work –weirdly and wildly—to actually create crisis, to create disruption, all around themselves. Like a fireman actually setting a fire.

The real secret of life is not knowing how to behave in a crisis. It is knowing how to behave before a crisis! The secret of life is knowing how to behave when there is not a crisis, how to behave in the ordinary times of our lives. The times of human relationships, the times of practicing our routines, the times of gathering oil for our lamps.

Stay awake. Be alert. Pay attention. Be mindful. Those are all powerful phrases of spiritual advice. They are shared by most of the major historical religions of the world, from Buddhism and Hinduism to Judaism and Christianity: be mindful, keep awake. But staying awake and paying attention and being mindful don't happen by magic. They happen by practice. They happen when we have used ordinary time to prepare. They happen when we are prepared.

We get to know each other. We trust each other. We practice learning details. We climb the stairs around us when it is still daylight and not night. We get to know the world around us.

Jesus calls it keeping awake. I call it being prepared.

AMEN.

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