

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A couple of years ago, many star-gazers knew the asteroid labelled “2012 DA14” was coming. Discovered in February, 2012, this piece of rock hurtling through space was estimated to be only 45 feet across and less than half the length of a football field, but it was quickly apparent that its path regularly intersected the orbit of the earth.

That meant that there was always a slight, though insignificant, chance it would actually strike the earth. Keep in mind that there’s an awful lot of empty sky out there. Space is incredibly empty. Not only that, but the earth is on a fixed course.

However, a rock like 2012 DA14 is small enough that the course of its flight is changeable due to the gravitational influence of other celestial bodies. That means passing by the earth just might raise the odds that it would strike us!

Scientists quickly calculated that within a year after its discovery, it just might strike us. If it did, it was large enough to do serious damage. After the calculations were rechecked, however, scientists breathed a great sigh of relief: 2012 DA14 would miss the earth!

Even so, its near-passing, scheduled for February 15, 2013, was much anticipated. Publicity was prepared as if it were some sort of “rock star” – pun intended – and scientific gatherings were arranged along with watch parties. The day when it passed within 17,200 miles of earth was a “striking” event – second pun intended!

But then a literally striking event upstaged it: On that very day, in a coincidence that is almost beyond belief, a much smaller meteor – about 16 square yards –

plunged into our atmosphere and exploded over the small town of Yekaterinburg in the Chelyabinsk area of the isolated region of the Ural mountains in Russia.

The explosion had a blast equivalent to 300,000 tons of TNT. At least 1,000 people were injured. There was an immense amount of damage. And almost immediately, many asked why it was possible to predict the arrival of the one meteor that missed us while the one that actually did damage caught everyone by surprise.

The answer to that is alarmingly simple: You can’t see everything in the sky. The only solution is to always be alert. When it comes to things like meteors, and all sorts of natural disasters, you just don’t know.

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark is set in a week of both chance and choice. Jesus is in Jerusalem, confronted by the religious authorities who feel threatened by his presence. He receives the adulation of the crowds, yet knows there is much danger.

In response to the wonder expressed by the disciples at the marvelous stonework composing the temple – considered one of the wonders of the ancient world – Jesus replies that a time is coming when not one stone will stand upon another.

Then, in answer to the disciples’ question about when these things might occur, Jesus begins to draw a cosmic map of persecution, suffering, tribulation and, ultimately, triumph for those who stand firm in the faith.

Drawing upon the images of the prophets, Jesus warns us all about cataclysmic events, but concludes, “... about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32).

Here's where today's Gospel comes into play: We are warned that despite what anybody says, there is no way to know when the end will come. Therefore, we must keep alert. The image Jesus uses is that of a householder who sets out on a trip and leaves his slaves in charge.

The slaves don't know when he will return, and the master has no intention of alerting them in advance when he's on the way home. The only recourse the faithful servants have is to be constantly on alert.

The late Dr. Vernard Eller, a pastor and a scholar, in his commentary on Revelation, once noted that everyone who used the scriptures to predict the events of the end are batting .000, without exception! Yet the certainty of many who believe they know what we have been guaranteed we don't know is astounding!

Yet one wonders if one of the problems is that people have different ideas of what it means to be alert. For many, being alert means standing at the window and looking out for any sign of the master's return.

But farming requires a different kind of alertness – a combination of hard work and waiting and constant attention not to the chronological time but to the arrival of a season. And whether the season is here or not, there is always work to be done.

In his book Works and Days, the ancient Greek poet, Hesiod, speaking of the many tasks that take up a farmer's time, wrote, "It is not work that brings shame, but not working that is shameful!" Hesiod goes on to list what needs to be done and when it ought to be done.

The slaves who are told to be alert for the master's homecoming are not to drop everything and wait. Part of being alert for his return means they are to go about their normal tasks, seeing to the farming in the fields and the care of the house.

True Christian alertness, faithful alertness, means working purposefully, not idle waiting. That's why, in the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples are scolded by two angelic beings for staring up at the sky after Jesus has ascended into heaven, instead of doing what Jesus had told them to do (Acts 1:11).

There's no getting around the normal tasks we need to be about, whether we are farming, working in an office or out of our homes, raising children or raising funds.

Jesus spoke about serving "the least of these," and what greater work does he set before us than feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison? Tending to these is the best way to stay alert.

The same goes for this Advent season. The great Christmas holidays lie ahead, and for many there is much to be done: there are cookies to bake; shopping to finish; presents to wrap; decorations to hang. And with all that waits to be done, if you're not alert as you work, you will miss Christmas.

Now how, you may ask, is that possible? Unlike Easter, which is a movable feast and can catch us by surprise, Christmas is December 25, right? Maybe. Maybe not. You do not know when Jesus will be born in your heart! You do not truly know when Jesus will come alive in your home.

Maybe it will be sometime during the twelve days of Christmas, but there may come a moment a week in advance, or a week after, when the words of a much beloved carol or a song never before heard hit you just right and you know that Jesus is here.

There may be tenderness that matches the babe in the manger, or perhaps there are angels to see, singing hosanna in the highest, together in the heavens. And if we're not looking, we'll miss it.

If we can be surprised by the arrival of a meteor even when we are as alert as we can be, we can also be surprised by the return of Jesus, both in glory so grand that the whole world sees it, and in joy so quiet it explodes invisibly in our hearts and souls.

Moreover, why should so many people have thought, over the centuries, and even now, that they could outsmart everyone else and predict the time of the end, despite the clear words of Jesus that no one knows the hour? (Matthew 24:36).

Alertness leads to inspiration. Is it any surprise that the Rev. Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) was inspired to write the beloved carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” by his difficult journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to take part in a midnight service at the Church of the Nativity on Christmas Eve of 1865? That seems like an obvious inspiration.

But Noel Regney was inspired to write the classic “Do You Hear What I Hear?” while heavy of heart in October of 1962 during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis – when it seemed likely that nuclear weapons might soon rain down on the just as well as the unjust – by the ordinary sight of two women pushing their smiling babies in strollers on an autumn afternoon in New York City!

If you’re not looking, you won’t see Christmas all around you! So be alert! Be on the actively-working-for-God’s-kingdom kind of alert! The biblical kind of alert! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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