

BE ON THE ALERT
Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year, 2018
Mark 13:24-37

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon is our Gospel Reading from before, Mark 13:24-37: “**However, in those days, after that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. ²⁵ The stars will be falling from the sky; and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then He will send the angels, and gather His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.**

²⁸ “**Learn this parable from the fig tree! When its branch has already become tender and it puts out leaves, you know the summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things happening, you know He is near, at the doors.**

³⁰ “**Truly, I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until these things all take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words will certainly not pass away.**

³² “**No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.**

³³ “**Beware, and be on the alert! For you do not know when the time will be. ³⁴ It is like a man who was away on a journey. When he left home, he put his slaves in charge, assigned each one his task, and ordered the doorkeeper to keep watch. ³⁵ Therefore keep watch! For you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at the time when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. ³⁶ Make sure that, if he comes suddenly, he does not find you asleep! ³⁷ What I tell you, I tell everyone: ‘Keep watch!’”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Because today is the last Sunday of the Church year, we think of the Lord’s return. We long for that day, in fact, we ought to live our lives as though every day was our last, keeping watch, and being prepared for His coming. There’s no mistaking that that is the main point that Jesus is attempting to impress upon His followers in this morning’s Gospel lesson. We are warned to watch, to be on guard, to be alert and ready at all times because we don’t want to find ourselves asleep when He returns.

Soon we will be celebrating Christmas, remembering the first time our Lord came to earth as a little Child, but today we are reminded that we should *always be prepared* to celebrate the second coming of our Saviour.

We all have calendars hanging in our homes, and most of them have listed the dates of up and coming holidays, but none of them has a day listed when the Lord will return. There’s a good reason for that! We are never going to get a calendar that stops in the middle of one of the months and has “The Last Day” listed on it because **no one knows about that day or hour**. So, when we begin our preparations to celebrate Christmas, our Saviour’s first coming to this earth, we also continue our preparations for the celebration of our Saviour’s second coming.

So how do we prepare for Jesus’ second coming if we don’t know when it’s going to happen? Well, that’s exactly the point Jesus was making to His disciples, and us, over and over again: **Beware, and be on the alert! For you do not know when the time will be.**

What exactly does Jesus mean when He tells us to “**be on the alert**” for His coming? It certainly doesn’t mean that we are to spend our time trying to predict when Jesus is coming again. Unfortunately, this has occupied the time and minds of many people for centuries, including many Christians, apparently even since shortly after Christ’s ascension. Jesus had to warn His followers of this a few verses earlier in Mark. He said, “*Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘Look, He is there!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect,*” (Mark 13:21-22). Much of Christianity today is plagued by this obsession with prophecy and prediction of the end times, and many books have been written that try to equate the Bible’s prophesies about the “last days” with current events around the world. Yes, it’s true that even Jesus Himself

has given us signs of the “end times,” and there are other places in the New Testament that give prophecies about what will happen in the “last days.” However, Christ makes it very, very clear that those signs of the end are not to be used as predictors of Christ’s second coming, but as reminders to **be on the alert** and be ready at any time for the His return. Remember, Jesus first gave these signs to His disciples some 2000 years ago. The same goes for the rest of the New Testament prophecies. They were written to remind Christians of every generation - from the 12 disciples, to the last Christian who comes to faith on earth - that the “end times” are the entire time period between Christ’s first and second coming. Jesus has always wanted His followers to be ready for His return even if it were just a few moments after His ascension into heaven.¹

Jesus makes it very clear that we are not to be preparing ourselves for His second coming by predicting it. In fact, He says, **“No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”** This is obviously something we can’t fully understand: As true God, Jesus knows everything,² and Jesus Himself claimed that *“I and My Father are one,”* (John 10:30). After all, Jesus is the one who is going to return in judgement on the Last Day. However, Jesus is also true man - 100% human just like you and me - and during His life here on earth (what we call Jesus’ “humiliation”) He willingly laid aside and suppressed the full use of His powers as God. We are told that as true man Jesus even learned things and grew up physically and spiritually.³ Jesus only used His almighty power and wisdom as God when it was necessary to complete His work of salvation for the entire human race. Predicting the day of His return would not have served that purpose, therefore He didn’t need to know it while He was fulfilling God’s plan of salvation here on this earth, nor did He need to share that knowledge with His disciples or anyone else. If Jesus Himself, as true Man, during His state of humiliation here on earth did not know the “day or hour” of His second coming, how are we ever going to predict it?

What Jesus does mean when He says, **“to be on the alert,”** He shows us clearly by means of an illustration, **“It is like a man who was away on a journey. When he left home, he put his slaves in charge, assigned each one his task, and ordered the doorkeeper to keep watch. Therefore keep watch! For you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at the time when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. Make sure that, if he comes suddenly, he does not find you asleep!”**

Let’s pause and think about this for a moment. What do you think the master of that house expected his slaves to do after he left for that far country? Do their jobs and wait for his return, of course! Why do you think he didn’t tell his slaves when he was going to come back? Maybe because while the boss is away, the employees will play! But if the boss gives his workers some jobs to do and tells them to get them done before he gets back, but doesn’t tell them when he’s coming back, there is a much better chance that human nature will not get the better of those workers and they will do the work that their boss had given them so they make sure they have it done before he gets back. Now, what do you think the master of this house would do if he found his slaves and the doorkeeper, whom he specifically told to “watch,” sleeping when he got back? He would be one angry master, that’s for sure, and at the very least all those slaves would certainly lose their jobs.

Now let’s apply this illustration to us. Jesus has given us and all Christians “work to do” after He ascended into heaven and He has given to each one of us individual members of His church different gifts to be able to perform those duties. He has commissioned us to *“make disciples of all the nations,”* (Matthew 28:18), to *“preach the Gospel,”* - that is, tell the “Good News” of salvation through Jesus - *“to every creature,”* (Mark 16:15). He has told us to build each other up and strengthen each other, to help out anyone who is in need and do good to all.⁴ He has given each one of us the “job” of “doorkeeper” to keep watch for His return, and so He tells us to gather together to worship Him and encourage each other in love and good works as we wait for His return on the Last Day.⁵ He has also given us His Word and His Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, specifically, as a “remembrance” of Him.⁶

What do you think Jesus is going to do if He finds His servants have “forgotten” about Him, or finds us not doing the work He has given us, or not watching for His return, but rather finds us “sleeping”?

¹ Acts 1:7-11

² John 21:17

³ Luke 2:40

⁴ Matt. 10:24; Heb. 12:12-13; Gal. 6:10

⁵ Hebrews 10:24-25

⁶ Luke 22:19

Now Jesus obviously doesn't mean physical sleep here in this illustration; no doubt there will be millions of people in the world who will be awakened from physical sleep when the trumpet sounds at Jesus' return. He is speaking of spiritual sleep - unbelief. Not watching for Him and keeping Him in our heart and mind but forgetting about Him and crowding Him out of our hearts, minds, and lives. Jesus gives us this warning in Luke's Gospel, "*Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap,*" (Luke 21:24). For those who have fallen asleep spiritually into unbelief the return of the Master will be terrifying and will seal their fate eternally in hell.

Jesus does not want His return to be terrifying for anyone. He wants His return to be for our rescue as our loving Saviour, not for our condemnation as an angry judge. He wants it to be something that we look forward to and even pray for daily.⁷ For us, His return will be a glorious day! Our "last day" will be the greatest day of our lives. On that day we will experience the incredible joys and eternal peace of the heaven that Jesus paid His own life to earn for us. We'll see for ourselves why Jesus went through so much for us, even taking the nails of the cross - even death and hell itself for us! Heaven must be some kind of treasure for Jesus to have wanted that badly to give it to us! That is the treasure He wants us to set our hearts on. Jesus once said, "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,*" (Luke 12:34). We set our hearts on that treasure when we make His Word - hearing from Him - a priority in our daily lives. We set our hearts on that treasure when we make His people - the blessing of fellowship - a priority in our lives, and come together for worship and Bible Study whenever we are able. We set our hearts on that treasure when we make use of the incredible blessing of prayer that Jesus has given us - actually speaking to God Himself - praying to Him to give us strength and faithfulness to **be on the alert** till the end.

Unfortunately, during the very time of year when we're supposed to be preparing to celebrate Christ's first coming to this earth, it is probably the most difficult time to keep our hearts and minds watchful for His second coming. Nearly everything that the world throws at us (or what we throw ourselves into) during the coming Christmas season clutters our hearts and minds with the things of this world and detracts from a "watchful" focus on our Saviour and His return. Even things that are just fine and good in and of themselves can take the place in our hearts that should be reserved for Jesus. Decorating, gift giving, visits with family members and friends can all very easily become the "reason for the season" instead of Jesus. None of these very good things is worth "falling asleep" spiritually for and losing your own soul.

So, with the Spirit's help, let's all keep our eyes fixed on Jesus⁸ and our hearts and minds ready for His coming. Jesus is Coming! Keep Watch! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE LAST SUNDAY OF THE CHURCH YEAR

Heavenly Father, we love and praise You because You have saved us and called us to be Your own people, not because of what we are or have done, but because of Your mercy and grace. In Jesus Christ You planned our salvation before the beginning of time, and revealed it to us in His first coming. We praise You for all Your daily goodness, but especially for giving Jesus for us to suffer, die, and rise again, destroying death and giving us eternal life.

Grant us Your grace that we may remain to the end in the saving truth of Your Word, produce the fruits of faith, hope, and love, and finally receive the crown of righteousness on that great day when Jesus comes again. Continue to protect us from all the errors, lies, false security, and empty wisdom of this world. Strengthen us to live in peace and holiness with all people, to endure humbly whatever we have to face because we are Your children, and to pray fervently in every time of temptation. Make us aware of the signs of the last times, and help us to focus our eyes on the home above that will one day be ours.

Make Your Church strong, O Father. Give it power to fight the good fight of faith with eager determination. Give us faithful pastors who know Christ, and whom Christ will know on His return. Grant that our young people may be equipped to serve You and their fellowmen in every useful and honourable career. Bless all people who serve the needy. Graciously enable all parents to teach their children the way of life in Christ Jesus, that the young may remain faithful to their Lord to the end.

⁷ Rev. 22:20

⁸ Hebrews 12:2

Rule and direct the nations of the earth that they may turn from darkness to Your light. Protect and defend our own land. Lead those who are guilty of wickedness, immorality, and materialism to repent. Put down all evil in our society and let Your Word triumph, that truth and godliness may hold sway.

Hear the cries of the needy, and come to their aid. Strengthen the weak, comfort the depressed, and heal the sick. Help them to accept their situation with trust in Your love, and build up their joy and hope. Keep us all strong in faith, that we may look with joy for the return of our Lord. To Him, with You and the Holy Spirit, be honour, glory, and power for ever. Amen.

The Last Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 51:4-6

⁴ “Pay attention to Me, My people! Listen to Me, My nation! For Teaching will go out from Me, and I shall establish My justice in an instant as a light for the peoples. ⁵ My righteousness is near. My salvation will go out, and My arms will bring justice to the peoples. The coastlands will put their hope in Me, and they will wait eagerly for My arm. ⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath! For the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth **will wear out like a garment**, and those who dwell in it will die like gnats. However, My salvation will last for ever, and My righteousness will not be frustrated.

Jude 20-25

²⁰ You, however, dearly loved people, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit!
²¹ Keep yourselves in the love of God and wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you eternal life!
²² Some people have doubts. Show mercy on them! ²³ Save others “by snatching them out of the fire”! Show mercy to still others, with fear, detesting even the garment stained by the flesh!
²⁴ Furthermore, to Him who can keep you from falling and to make you stand without fault and with great joy in His glorious presence, ²⁵ to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all ages and now and for ever and ever! Amen.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ “However, in those days, after that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. ²⁵ The stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then He will send the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven. ²⁸ “Learn this parable from the fig tree! When its branch has already become tender and puts out leaves, you know the summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things happening, you know He is near, at the

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