

Last Sunday of the Church Year

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 the sermon is the Gospel heard before, 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 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 in your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Peace be with you.

Today’s Gospel is part of the same conversation that you heard last week. As Jesus and the disciples left the temple area, Jesus told them that sometime in the future, someone or something will destroy the temple. When He and the disciples reached their camp ground on the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked for more details, and Jesus began to teach. He warned them to keep their doctrine pure so that false prophets would not deceive them. He told them to expect persecution for their faith and encouraged them to remain faithful even in the face of persecution. He gave them warning signs so that they knew to get out of Jerusalem before the Roman army destroyed it. As His teaching continues in today’s Gospel, He talks about the end of all things.

Jesus’ description of the end of time is literally universal. That is, He gave the disciples and us a visual image of an entire universe going out of existence. It’s as though someone had a switch that controlled all the laws of physics and turned them off. The sun going out is not an eclipse. It’s the sun no longer existing. The moon will no longer exist. Modern astronomy tells us that many of the stars are millions of times larger than our Sun. Jesus states that they will all go away. One moment everything will be absolutely normal. The next moment EVERYTHING, and by EVERYTHING I mean THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE, will be gone. The three hours of darkness as Jesus hung on the cross foreshadows this utter darkness.

One of the things that Jesus emphasizes is that this will all be a surprise. No one will have any idea when this will happen. He said, **“No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.** He restated this thought just a few words later, **33 “Beware, and be on the alert! For you do not know when the time will be.** Then He included this teaching in a short parable, **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.** When Jesus rephrases a teaching in three different ways ... one right after the other ... it’s important. One of the teachings that Jesus is emphasizing in today’s Gospel is, "Don't try and work out the time and date of the end times because you won't be able to do it."

Nevertheless, there are hundreds, perhaps even thousands of authors and teachers who are making a lot of money by telling people that Jesus lied. They say You can figure out timelines and dates for the end times.

I typed the phrase “end times prophecy books” into Google's search engine and got over 3,000 hits. A few of these books are good, solid, Biblically accurate studies, but the far larger majority of them are a waste of ink and paper, and the time to look at them!. Authors are becoming wealthy by telling gullible readers a pile of gobly-goop that says they are smarter than Jesus. Even though Jesus said that even He didn't know the day or the hour, somehow, these con-artists have worked out some secret code of Daniel or Revelation or some other scam, and they know something that even Jesus didn't know.

Think about the damage this kind of foolishness does to the name of Christ. Some bloke gets a following and makes a big deal out of the end of the Mayan calendar, or the Bible code, or some ancient writing, or some other gimmick. He predicts the end of the world on some date. The date comes and goes and we are still here. The result is that many in the unbelieving world think that Christians are idiots! These end-times con artists not only say that Jesus lied, but they also drag the name of Jesus through the mud.

Furthermore, all of this speculation acts as a diversionary tactic that leads people away from the main message of the Bible. If you review today's Gospel, you'll see that there is a concept that Jesus repeated even more than the warning against trying to figure out timelines and dates. Instead of trying to calculate times and dates, Jesus said, **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!’** Five times Jesus encourages us to be alert keep watching and ready for the Last Day whenever it comes.

In today's reading from the Gospel account, Jesus is very specifically telling us to stay away from any speculation on timelines and dates for the Last Day. Instead, we are to be ready for the Last Day no matter when it comes. But how do we come to be ready? What qualifies us to be one of the elect that the angels gather to the Son of Man when He comes? The answer to these questions is the main message of the Bible.

The main message of the Bible is the forgiveness of sins that Jesus earned for us with His perfect life, His suffering, and His death on the cross. You see, Jesus didn't die on the cross so that we could know the details of all the events on the Last Day. He died so that we could be prepared for the Last Day.

Preparation for the Last Day means that we must be holy in God's eyes. For only those people who are holy will enter the Kingdom of God. The Bible gives us two ways to be holy. One way depends on us. The other way depends on God.

The way that depends on us is easy to say, but impossible to do. If you wish to save yourself, all you must do is be perfect in every way. There can be no mistakes, no slip-ups, no “oopsies,” no “sorry-about-that's.” We must be as perfect as God is. The slightest blemish, spot, wrinkle, or blot on our record, and we fail. It is all over. The test is a pass-fail exam. 100% passes. Anything else is a fail, no second chance, next stop eternal torment. There are no appeals either. In all of time and space, there has been only one human being who has ever pulled this off. Every other human being fails this test at the moment of conception. As King David said, **“In sin did my mother conceive me.”** [Psalm 51:5] So although God makes this way available, one and only one human being has ever been able to do it. It just isn't possible for the ordinary person.

The way that depends on God involves God the Father sending His only begotten Son into the world to take our place as a human being under the law. God's Son Jesus is perfect. With Him there are no mistakes, slip-ups, “oopsies,” or “sorry-about-that's.” Jesus has no blemish, spot, wrinkle, or blot. Jesus is the one and only human being who passed the test with a score of 100%. As the Apostle Peter said, **“He did not commit any sin and no deceit was found in His mouth. 23 When others insulted Him, He did not insult them in return. When He suffered, He did not make threats, but handed it over to Him who judges justly.”** [1 Peter 2:22–23] So God the Father sent His Son Jesus into the world and Jesus became the perfect human being for us.

On top of that, Jesus submitted to His Father and took up all our sins. He took up everything from the sins that we consider the worst to the sins that we don't even notice. As the Apostle Paul said, **“21 God**

made Him who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” [2 Corinthians 5:21] Jesus then took those sins to the cross where He suffered and died for us. As the Apostle Peter said, **“24 He Himself carried our sins in His body to the cross, so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness. By His wounds you were healed”** [1 Peter 2:24] This is the way that God makes us holy. This is the only way to be ready for the Last Day when it comes. Jesus Christ, God’s Son must give His holiness to us and He offers that holiness to us from the cross.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus promised to send out the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. He can make this promise because even though He died on the cross, He did not stay dead. In His death, He conquered death so that the grave could not hold Him. If He can keep His promise to rise from the dead, He can certainly keep His promise to raise us from the dead and gather us to Himself.

Jesus spoke about the Last Day. He taught that no one knows when it will be. Therefore, He taught that we are to be ready for the Last Day at any time. It could happen today. It could be another thousand years. Be ready.

It's the Holy Spirit who makes us ready by creating faith that believes in Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit uses God’s Word to build and sustain that faith in Jesus Christ. It is the Word that we hear with our ears, the Word combined with water according to Christ’s command, and the Word that comes with the body and blood of Christ as we eat and drink the bread and wine. It's by that faith that we are on guard, awake and watchful. It's the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith in Jesus Christ that keeps us ready for the return of the Son of Man who comes in power and glory.

This faith not only prepares us for the coming of the Son of Man in glory, but, if the Lord waits to return, it also prepares us for that day when we shall leave this world through the door of death. Just as no one knows the day that the world will end, so none of us knows if we will be around when it comes. The same faith in Jesus Christ that keeps us watchful and ready for the one, also keeps us watchful for the other. Whether we leave this world at the end of our own lives or at the end of the world, the same readiness saves us. No matter which way our end comes, it is God who saves us by the Father’s grace, for the Son’s sake, through the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith. Amen.

Prayer of the Church for the last Sunday of the Church Year

P Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Brief silence

P Almighty and everlasting God, You are worthy of praise and worship for all Your mighty acts of creation, for Your grace in preserving all You have made, and for redeeming sinners from sin and its death through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Lord in Your Mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P We give You thanks for Your Church and for Your Word and Spirit, calling sinners to repentance and teaching our fearful hearts to believe. As You have established Your Church through the blood of Christ, we pray You to keep her steadfast and faithful as we face the latter days before Christ returns in His glory. Bless those who proclaim the Gospel to us in Your name and who administer the Sacraments of life and worship according to Your institution. Lord in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Keep us from fear, and grant to us Your Spirit and Your courage, that we may anticipate with joy Christ’s coming again and faithfully do His bidding so that the world will be ready to receive Him when He comes as Lord and Judge of all. Open the hearts of all who hear Your Word, that by Your Spirit they may believe in Jesus Christ, whom You have sent, and be saved. . Lord in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Give to ours and to all the nations of the earth faithful leaders who will serve according to Your good pleasure to end war, restrain evil, promote virtue and ensure justice, that we may live our lives in all godliness, holiness and honesty. Bless those who protect and defend us, both near and far, including all members of the armed forces, police, firefighters, emergency medical personnel and hospice care workers. Lord in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Comfort and sustain all who struggle with illness, who live with pain, who suffer the afflictions of body and mind, who suffer adversity and who are in peril of death [*especially*

] According to Your gracious will, grant to them healing and relief, give them patience in their afflictions and faith that Your grace will be sufficient for all their need. Lord in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Deliver to us the riches and bounty of the earth and the grace to acknowledge them as Your gifts and blessings. Make us mindful of the poor and those in any need, that we may use Your gifts faithfully and for the relief of those who live in want. Open our hearts to the joy of giving, that we may return to You what is already Yours, worshiping You with our lips and our lives and bringing to You the tithes and offerings of a grateful heart. Lord in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Give Your blessing to husband and wife, to parent and child, to teacher and student, and to all who are instructed in the faith and given training in righteousness. Bless artists and artisans, labourers and managers, industry and agriculture, and all honest and lawful occupations. Preserve us from danger and disaster, and protect all who travel. Lord in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Loving Lord, we have confidence to enter the holy place of Your presence through the body and blood of Christ. As You have washed us with the pure water of Baptism, now feed us with the flesh and blood of Christ in His Sacrament, according to His own Word and promise, that we may be encouraged to love and good works. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Preserve us, O Lord, in the day of trouble and guard us, for here we are aliens and our only eternal home is what You have prepared for us in Jesus Christ. All these things and everything else for which we should ask, we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**