

Stay Awake – Watch!

Mark 13:33-37

Trinity Lutheran Church – Kearney, Missouri

November 22, 2009 – Last Sunday of The Church Year



Grace to you, and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Today is the Last Sunday of the Church Year – the closing chorus and grand finale of the Church’s celebration of Christ’s life. That celebration began with Advent, as the Church looks toward the Last Day when Christ will return in glory to bring an end to all things. That’s followed by Christmas, when the Father sends His Son to be born of the Virgin for the life of the world. Next comes Epiphany, where He’s revealed to the nations. Then comes Easter, when the Son dies and rises to complete His sacrifice for sin. And finally the celebration concludes with the season of Pentecost, when the Son sends the Spirit from the Father – who then Baptizes, teaches, preaches to, and feeds His Church until the End. Then the cycle begins all over again – as it will next Sunday unless the Lord returns – and on and on and on, until the end of time.

Putting it yet another way, Jesus was the first Word, and He is also the last Word. He is the “Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.” And because this is true, as we stand once more on the threshold of another Advent, it’s appropriate for us this morning to consider again the last Word Jesus spoke to His disciples here in this text. That word – translated in the ESV as “Stay Awake” – most of us know as “Watch!” It’s an important word, because that moment when our Lord returns at the end of time is not nearly as predictable as many other things, such as the changing of the seasons. And do we not confess this great doctrine every week in the Creeds when we say, “He will come again in glory, to judge both the living and the dead?” But as to *when* this will actually happen, no one knows – nor is our Lord going to tell us!

“No one knows the day or the hour,” says Jesus, “not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” But what would happen if were possible to know the day and hour of Christ’s arrival? Well, what happens when the boss is away from the office or on vacation? What happens when the teacher leaves the classroom? Or, heaven forbid, what would happen if parents were to go somewhere and leave their little children in charge of the house? What comes to my mind is that “when the cat’s away, the mice will play” – and even more so, I suspect, when the mice know precisely when the cat is going to return!

Jesus tells us here in this text that the End will be like a man who goes out of town on a business trip, leaves a check list of things for his servants to do, signs a stack of blank checks for them to pay the bills, commands the

doorkeeper to be on guard 24 hours a day, and then leaves without telling anyone the time of his return. It’s a clever master who purposely *doesn’t* tell his servants when he’s coming back. It could be in the evening, at the stroke of midnight, at 3:00 when the rooster crows, or at the crack of dawn. And because it could be at any time, all the servants can do is be alert and watchful for his coming.

What do you suppose *you’d* do if you knew the exact day and hour of Jesus’ Second Coming? Would it change your life in any significant fashion? Would you live in expectation of His return – making the most of your time by hearing His Word, confessing your sin, receiving the Sacrament, and telling others of His great love for us all? Or would you rather procrastinate, figuring you had plenty of time to clean up your act before He came back? Would you live as if God and His Word mattered most to you – or as if you, your wants and your desires were more important than anything else? Would you devote more time to worship and less to play? Would you use that knowledge for your own benefit and for the benefit others – or would you use it as a license to do what you wanted to do?

I suspect that if you knew the exact moment of your death you could, *theoretically*, plan accordingly. You could get your calendar in order and make sure everything was ready for that day. But if you’re a procrastinator like me, most likely you would postpone such matters until the last minute – taking time to do all the things you wanted to do – and figuring there’d still be an abundance of time left before the arrival of the “big day.” But as that day and hour drew nearer, I also suspect anxiety and panic would set in as you tried in vain to get your house in order before the Master walked through the front door. So, ultimately, knowing the day and the hour would probably only result in a false sense of security and a feeling of complacency – perhaps even unbelief! You’d end up like the disciples of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane – dozing off on your watch – lulled into a sleepy, phony feeling of satisfaction.

In contrast, I’d like you to note how the first Christians were motivated and energized by something else. They were moved by their belief that Jesus’ return was imminent. They expected Him to come during their lifetime – and they lived their lives focused on an understanding that the Lord was always nearby. The Thessalonians, for example, were particularly alert to the return of Christ. Some were even saying He’d already returned.

That's why Paul wrote: "But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night . . . So then, let us not sleep – as others do – but let us keep awake and be sober . . . Let us put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ – who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are {already} doing."

This understanding is what moved the early Christians to be so active in outreach and mission. Their work wasn't done for the sake of their own survival – or because they needed more members to balance the budget or fill the pews. It was because they believed the day of Christ's coming was near – *always* right around the corner. They were driven by the clear-headed realization that every day might well be the Day to end all days – that Day when the Lord who died and rose for all would come to judge the living and the dead. And they wanted *everyone* to know that this Jesus who was coming had already come once to die for them, too.

This is what gave the early Christians hope and meaning as the world was literally crumbling around them. They knew that this Jesus – whose coming they longed, looked, and prayed for – was the same One who was already coming to them in the water of Baptism, in the Word of forgiveness, in the Supper of His very own body and blood, and who promised, "I am coming soon." Jesus had made it quite clear that the end wasn't a time for "couch-potato Christianity," comatose complacency, or sitting on the sidelines watching others "play Church." "Be careful," Jesus says, "or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life – and that day will close in on you unexpectedly like a trap."

Dear friends, these words are for your ears, too. The End Times call for you to live your life in a constant state of repentance, to daily turn from sin to Christ, to fast and pray that you might constantly be sober, alert, and vigilant – like a doorkeeper watching and waiting for the master's return, or a watchman standing guard on the walls of the city. Keep watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the owner of the house is returning! But there's no reason to fear, either. Remember, the One for whom you watch and wait is an Old Friend – a Friend who came in human flesh by a crib and virgin's womb to save us all – who hung on a cross with our sin and rose from the dead to give us His victory – who Baptized us into His death and resurrection – who fills our ears and

hearts with a Word – His Word – which has the power to forgive and cleanse us – and through His very body and blood, which is to be eaten and drunk for the forgiveness of our sins, unite us to Himself.

The Day we're watching and waiting for is a Good Day, a Gospel Day, the Day of salvation. It's a Day of fulfillment – a Day when all that Jesus died on the cross to win for us will be given *to you* – a Day when all the promises made at *your Baptism* will be brought to completion – a Day when every tear will be wiped from *your* eyes – a Day when all uncertainty, killing, war, violence, disease and death will once and for all be swallowed up in the victory of Christ – a Day when all you now possess *by faith* in Christ will be seen clearly – a Day when God will see *you* in the glory of His Son – a Day when *you'll* receive a new and incorruptible body – a body that'll share in the life of the Son of God who loved us all, and gave Himself up *for you*.

But as you watch and wait, you're not alone, for Christ is with you, even now – in Baptism, in His Supper, and in His body, the Church, of which He has made you a member. He's here with you today – on this Lord's Day – preparing you for His Day – ensuring that your breastplate of faith and helmet of salvation are firmly in place. The One who's coming on that Day, is the very same One who comes to you now. It's no stranger you're going to meet, but Him whom you've known since Baptism – the One you meet every Lord's Day in the Liturgy. You daily watch and wait in His presence – and in the presence of His fellow servants – the members of His Church on earth – the angels, archangels, all the company of heaven, and that great cloud of witnesses who've already gone on into glory before us through the merits of Christ.

In the end, you see, it doesn't matter that you don't know the day or the hour of our Lord's coming. Indeed, it's a good thing you don't know. But what you do know, dear children of God – is that your future rests securely in Jesus' nail-scarred hands – and in the firm, unshakeable knowledge that *He* will bring His work to completion at a day and on an hour that no one knows. All you need to do now is stay awake and watch! Stay awake and watch in the confidence that He who is able to keep you from falling will one Day – on that last Day – that Day of the Resurrection of all flesh – present *you* before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy – and this through the power and might of our only God and Savior – to whom alone be glory, majesty, power, and authority – through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.