

**Mark 13:32-37** “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Watch! Be alert and pray, because you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going away on a journey. When he left his home, he put his servants in charge and assigned what each one was to do. He also commanded the doorkeeper to keep watch. <sup>35</sup>Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house is coming: whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. <sup>36</sup>If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. <sup>37</sup>What I say to you, I say to everyone: Keep watch!”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. This is my 15th Advent as a pastor. And in each one of those advent seasons I can almost guarantee that I asked the question, “Are you ready for Christmas?” In one sense you can answer that question by thinking about all that you need to do to get ready to celebrate Jesus’ birth. The cooking and cleaning, the cards and presents, the decorating and planning and always more shopping... Of course I’m not ready! Quit asking!

But on the other hand, we know when Christmas is. December 25th. The same date every year. Of course we’re going to be ready! You’ve got plenty of time. 26 days till Christmas. Some places have those count down clocks on the wall, counting down to Christmas morning. 620 hours and 40 minutes until 6am on December 25th. Plenty of time to do all you need to do. Even probably enough time to procrastinate a little bit, if you like.

Celebrating Jesus’ first coming is one thing, but what about his second coming? For that day there is no timer on the wall counting down to zero hour. There may be plenty of time left, or only days, hours, minutes, or seconds. **No one knows the day or hour**, Jesus said. There’s no time to lose our focus, certainly there’s not time to procrastinate. Jesus says, **Keep watch! Be alert and pray!**

We are alert when it comes to a lot of things in our lives. Thanks in a big part to smart phones, we’re constantly tuned in to the weather, to politics, our calendar. We keep tabs our health, our finances, the lives of those we love, our pets, our cars, our homes, the latest movies and entertainment, shopping, clothes, on and on... We keep tabs on just about every aspect of our lives. It can be exhausting and overwhelming. So we have more and more apps on our phones like facebook that keep us up to date on many of *those* in our lives, no matter how far away they may live. Reminders go off when it’s time to pay bills, take medication, to remember all sorts of

*things* going on in our lives. Why? So that we don’t miss out. So we’re not caught of guard, so we don’t mess up. So we can keep on succeeding and enjoying this life.

Yet, in the grand scheme of things, these priorities in our lives, really don’t matter. They each last only a little while, and then — their gone, over, and done. The things we work so hard to prepare for and secure, and enjoy, and then remember and think fondly of, where will they be in 100 years, or 50, or 20??

Eternity, on the other hand, is just that — eternity! Forever! How much time do we spend thinking about that? How many apps do we have on your phone reminding us of that? How much effort do we spend preparing for that?

Jesus said the last day is like a man going on a journey, leaving his servants in charge, assigning each with something to do. They didn’t know when their master was going to return so they had to get up each day making sure the task their master gave them was complete, because, who knows, this might be the day. Whether it had been a week, a month, or even a year, they couldn’t say, well, I’ll just take today off and not worry about my master’s return — no! That might be the day! No one knows!

Think of how many days in your life have gone by when it didn’t even cross your mind — this could be the day! The lack of thought we give to Jesus’ second coming is a sign of how, at times, poorly prepared we are for it. Think of how many days have gone by in our lives when that could have been the day, when I was too busy worrying about the things of this world, or, too busy filling up on the things of this world, or, too busy chasing after the things of this world. Too busy letting my sinful flesh at first, just look, but then touch, and then taste, and then consume the things of this world. That day, that time, *that sin*, could have been the moment when there were no moments left, but an eternity of regret.

Regret that we didn’t keep watch, that we weren’t more alert, awake, and focused on all that God did to rescue us from eternal punishment in hell because our sins.

How tragic for those who find themselves in hell, but even more tragic for those who had God’s answer, his rescue, his grace, and lost it by their own rejection, their own turning away, their own failure to keep watch, to stay alert.

For God so loved the world that he sent his Son to die for the sins of the world, so that the whole world might put their faith in him and not perish, but have eternal life.

This message, this promise, this revelation, is more important than worrying about retirement, more important than Suzy's soccer game, however good she is, more important than the means to achieve a life of luxury or that next level of financial security.

Think of all the wealth in the world. Imagine being a billionaire. Imagine having the power and authority of world leaders, the influence and popularity they have, causing nations to rise and fall. Money, wealth, power, authority, success, fulfillment, security, these are the smoke screens that Satan has been using to lull the masses into complacent slumber when it comes to what really matters — the Words and promises of our God. His revelation about our sin and the solution found in his grace.

As important as these worldly things are in our day to day life, here and now, in one brief moment, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, it's all going to be rendered worthless. When Jesus returns, those things in our lives that are most important, that we fret about and concern ourselves with to the point of losing sleep, losing weight, losing hope, will be no more.

For those caught off guard, who rejected God's grace, a new stress will overtake them, as eternal death awaits. But for those who throughout their lives constantly guarded their faith and prioritized the growth of their faith, there will be nothing but the joy and peace of the eternal life prepared for them.

So we must keep watch so that we don't lose what has been so graciously given to us. In a world that is literally hell-bent on covering up sin and negating it's consequences, cheapening and downplaying the roll of faith in God and his promises, we must stay alert. We must live a life of repentance, a life where we are constantly aware of our sin and their consequences, so that we constantly see our need for our Savior. A life where we constantly see our need for our Savior is a life where we will not only be alert to the attacks of the devil, world, and our sinful flesh, but also a life where we will be constantly looking to the sky, keeping watch for our Savior's return, and the eternal life to which he will bring us home.

With the stakes so high, keeping watch, staying alert, can be overwhelming. It can be scary, like a watchmen on the wall fully aware that Satan is going to stop at nothing to get us to fall. If we were alone on that wall, it would be too much. But we're not. Of course we have each

other, brothers and sisters in Christ who are all under the same threat of sin, death, and the devil. And what a blessing it is when we can help one another carry that load. But even more than that we have one we can go to who was under the same burdens, the same threats, the same attacks, and overcame them all. That Jesus who did all that for us, bids us come to him in prayer for every need.

So, of course we pray to him asking for God's forgiveness and mercy, and we find that he's already given us his answer here in his Word: go in peace, your sins are forgiven for my sake, because I lived my life for you and died on the cross in your place.

And we go back to our Savior in prayer for strength in our weaknesses and again we find that he's already answered us here in his Word: **Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.**

And we go back to our Savior in prayer, that we would focus on the things that really matter in this life, and here he answers that prayer with the opportunity to focus on him here each week.

And as we gather around Word and Sacrament each week, we find his answer to our prayers that we would grow in our faith. As we were reminded last week in our Thanksgiving service, week in and week out all year long here are his Words and promises, here is the sacrament offered regularly holding before you the very price he paid to rescue you from sin, death, hell, and the devil — his own body and blood. Through these means of grace he forgives, strengthens, refocuses, and grows our faith so that we truly aren't alone as we strive to keep watch and stay alert.

True, none of this sounds very flashy. Imagine how powerful it would be if we prayed and the heavens opened and lighting flashed and thunder crashed and boom, our prayers were answered in some great and powerful way. And yet as we find the answer to all our prayers here in the Word, here at church in Word and sacrament, who is at work? The Holy Spirit of God — who brought you back from death to life when he created your faith, who has sustained your faith throughout your life to this very moment, and who has promised to see you through to the end, come what may...the Holy Spirit of God dwells in your heart...

So that when the master returns, when Jesus our Savior comes again on the last day, we will be ready. The Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament will see to it.

I wonder if God cares about Christmas? Of course he wants us to be in church, hearing his Word, keeping watch, staying alert. But what if we missed Christmas? What if we didn't celebrate it? What if we still came to church but focused on a different part of God's Word or Jesus' life? It wouldn't really matter. Our God is a God of hope, a God of the future he has secured for us. What is more important than celebrating Christ's first coming, is his second coming.

That's why we celebrate Christmas, not just to look back to the manger, or to the nostalgia of our youth, but so that we are looking ahead to when Jesus will come again.

We know when Christmas is, and don't worry, we're celebrating it! But when is his return? Keep watch! Be alert — pray. Amen!

The Old Testament reading stresses that Christ's second coming is reality. Already in the OT, God promised to rip the sky in half one day. Who will stand on that day? Those whom the potter has shaped into people of faith.

The 2nd reading assures us that while the date of Christ's second coming is not known, we can "eagerly wait" for that day. For while we are not always faithful, God is. He keeps his promise to use all the gifts given to the Church to sustain our faith.