

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

NOT *WHEN?* BUT *HOW?*

Mark 13:24-37; Proper 29B; Last Sunday; November 23-24, 2024

Mark chapter 13 begins with a disciple pointing out to Jesus the magnificent temple buildings in Jerusalem. Jesus' response to this was stating that the buildings would be destroyed. Peter and Andrew, James and John wanted to know when. "**When will this all happen?**" History tells us that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in the year 70. But what about the end of the world, which Jesus also described last week and today in the Gospel? When will that happen?

If you are anything like me, you want to know what to expect and when to expect it. This is true whether we are facing good news or bad. When a father and mother are expecting the birth of a child, they are interested in knowing when the child is supposed to be born. When expecting something bad to happen, waiting for the "axe to fall," we want to know to be ready for it when it does. Good or bad, we want to know when. We can't blame the disciples for wanting to know when what Jesus described would take place.

Jesus answered their question. "**Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.**" The answer to when the end will come is that only God the Father knows. We might not like that answer, but it's the only one we have, and it directs us to what Jesus says is the more important question we should be asking about all this: How?

We don't know when Jesus will return in glory, but we know how He will return. "**In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send out the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.**" The One who came humbly and in weakness as a baby will return in glory with great power. And all creation, which has been subjected to futility since the fall into sin, will be destroyed with all its faults and made new for all believers, who will live in it with God forever.

What do you think about God destroying everything in the fallen creation when this world ends? Do you like that, or not? How we feel about it depends a lot on how we see the stuff of this world. We work hard making and keeping our lives as comfortable as possible. We accumulate the stuff we like and don't want to live without. Every day is a struggle to keep what we have. Even so, the longer we live the more we lose, taken away from us by sin, sickness, and weakness, and then we die. And we don't like that one bit. When Jesus comes in glory, what we have accumulated for ourselves here will be destroyed by God. How do you like that?

Everything good thing we have in this life is a gift from God, and we should be thankful for it. The temptation is to put our trust in our stuff rather than the God who gives it to us. If we feel like we will be losing out when Jesus comes in glory, do we think more of what we have right now than what we will receive then? This life from God is good, but the life to come is better beyond all comparison.

Jesus said: **Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life** (Jn 12:25). He said this shortly before He suffered and died on the cross to redeem this fallen world. Jesus gave everything He had to save us, so we would not perish with this fallen world when its end comes.

We don't know when Jesus will come in glory, but we know how He will come and what will happen when He comes. Jesus wants us to focus on how He will come, and teaches us how we should be waiting for His arrival whenever that will be.

“Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a Man going on a journey, when He leaves home and puts His servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the Master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning—lest He come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

Jesus used a series of words to describe how we should be waiting for His coming on the last day: **be on guard/keep your eyes open and pay careful attention** (βλέπετε); **keep awake/chase sleep away** (ἀγρυπνεῖτε); and **stay awake/be watchful** (γρηγορεῖτε). This is how we should be ready for Christ's glorious return, even if we don't know when that will be. What does it mean to be attentively on guard, awake, and watchful? What is behind Jesus' warning not to be found **sleeping** when He arrives?

Jesus compares our alert watchfulness to servants left to do their work while their master was off on a journey, especially a doorkeeper at night whose job it was to guard the master's house from intruders and announce the master's return to the rest of the servants. Jesus is that Master and we, Christians still alive on this earth, are those servants. Obviously, Jesus does not expect us never to go to sleep physically; every human needs good sleep to be healthy. To stay awake is to keep the true faith in Jesus; to fall asleep or not be watching constantly is to lose our faith in Jesus or focus our thoughts and desires on something or someone other than Jesus. If He finds us asleep when He arrives, we will be found unfaithful and condemned to hell.

Like many people, I stayed up late on election night to find out who would win. I didn't get to bed until after 2 AM and couldn't fall asleep for a while. Whenever I do something like this, I regret it the next day, especially since staying awake did not make any difference to the outcome. I was exhausted the next day from lack of sleep. What good did it do me?

Being alert, awake, and watchful for the coming of Christ on the last day is different. There is great benefit to that "staying awake." While we are waiting and watching for Jesus' return, our focus is faith in Him and the things of faith. We need to keep from being distracted by the things of this world that will perish and be destroyed when He comes. There are many things that God gives us in this life that we cannot live without, but if they don't last into the "life of the world to come," what value should we put on them? They are less important than the things God gives us that last forever.

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What are some things that will last forever? Jesus states: **Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.** How should we be waiting for the end of the world? Hearing and believing God's Word in Christ is the key to staying alert, awake, and watching for Jesus' glorious return. This happens right here in church, but not only here.

In the parable Jesus told to illustrate this, the Master of a home, that is, Jesus, went away for a while on a journey, and then returned. Jesus' death and resurrection, His ascension to heaven and return on the last day, would match this. What are His servants, that is, all Christians, supposed to do when He is away? We should be about the tasks God has given us to do in His house.

In God's house we hear and learn His Word, receive His gifts of forgiveness of sins in Baptism, in Absolution, and the Lord's Supper, which strengthen and keep us in the true faith until He returns, or we die in our bodies and our souls go be with Jesus in heaven. Our lives as active members of this congregation have this as their main focus. Whether it is in church worshiping or at Sunday school and Bible classes, attending our parochial schools where teaching and learning God's Word permeates the day, serving on boards and committees, or participating in other groups and congregational activities, God's Word in Christ is central.

Christians also serve their Master outside of congregational life: at home and with family, at work, at school, at play. Whatever God gives us to do and be responsible for in our daily lives, we do that as faithful servants of Christ. God's Word and living by faith is not a one-day-a-week thing when we escape the "real world" for a while and then return to it. What most people count as "real" will pass away on the last day. In the real world that will last forever, lives are focused on God and His Word.

We don't know when this world will come to an end; we don't know when we will die or if we will die before Jesus returns in glory. Being alert, watchful, and awake in faith until we die, or Jesus returns is how we will be ready for that day. Jesus says: **"What I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.**