

"Be on Guard! Be Alert! Watch!" - St. Mark 13:32-37

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our text for meditation for this last Sunday in the Church Year is from the Gospel of Mark 13: 32-37.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week, if there is a next week, we start all over again with Advent, looking toward the second appearing of Christ as we prepare to celebrate His first appearing. But, today marks the end.

Jesus predicted and spoke about false teachers, earthquakes and famines, wars and death, and persecution for the believers. There is cause for gloom but, even more reason for faith; salvation is at hand. Jesus says, Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. Can we be sure of all that Christ said? Jesus predicted a handful of things. He predicted His own death and resurrection. At least three times He said that He would suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be crucified, and on the third day rise from the dead. And this happened as He said He would. That fact alone should cause us to sit up and take notice of everything He said, because resurrections do not happen every day. In fact, this kind of resurrection happened only once.

Jesus predicted that Peter would betray Him three times before the rooster crowed, and He did, just as Jesus said He would. Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be overrun and the temple destroyed, and it was in AD 70 by the Romans, just as Jesus said. Jesus said that the world as we know it, the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the vast reaches of space, the inner reaches of the earth, will all be destroyed.

Friends, it will happen just as Jesus said it would. There is no reason to doubt what Jesus is saying. He is the expert on beginnings and endings. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the Ending, the First and the Last. He was there in the beginning before the heavens and the earth. Through Him, all things were made. And He will be there at the end, reigning over all things, raising the dead, giving salvation, doing justice to sin, judging the world in His righteousness. He has the first word of creation and the last word pertaining to the end.

That is our sure and certain hope. We have hope in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Our worship and devotional life, our liturgy, and our practices point all to that hope of salvation in Christ. For, if we did not have that hope of that final saving word of the Lord Jesus Christ

reigning that word over us throughout this life and the life to come, then there would be absolutely no reason for us to be here this morning? We could be at home resting or doing something else.

But, what do you think we are praying about when we pray, "Thy Kingdom come," and Deliver us from evil, and "Come Lord Jesus?" What do you think we are doing when we confess our faith and hope in, "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?" Or when we receive the body and the blood of the Lord that will strengthen and preserve us steadfast in the true faith to life everlasting?

Friends, Christ is going to return, maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, next year or a few years from now. We do not know when, but we know He is going to come back to gather up His people. That means you and me, to be with Him, in His presence, at His feast, on His holy mountain, forever and ever, without end. That is the reason why Jesus came in the first place. That is the reason why He died on the cross. There is nothing that God wants more than to have each and every one of us there in heaven with Him forever. And that is what the faith the Holy Spirit has called us into, the Christian faith, focuses on, and we have heard Jesus word of warning to wait and keep watch for that great Day of His return because it comes quickly, like a thief in the night.

Our Lord gives us a general kind of a warning. Jesus' warning to His disciples does not come out of the blue, but it comes after three years of teaching and learning. By comparison, when parents see their child off to college, they may say much the same words; "Be careful." This warning does not just come out of the blue either but is understood in light of some eighteen or so years of parental nurturing. Obviously, mom and dad are not going to go through everything they have ever taught that child in the few moments while he or she is going out the door.

In a similar way, our Lord says, "Be on guard! Be alert! Watch!" When He said this He would have His disciples call to mind everything they had received and learned in the course of their time with Him. First the learning and then the watching. For them, and for us, there is much more than just a general warning in these words. It is not just abstract advice. It is not a caution about unspecified perils, but it is linked to the concrete foundation of faith in Christ and everything He has done and said.

Over the past fifty one weeks of the Church year we have learned to watch, by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We have learned about the Savior who came by way of virgin womb. We have learned to keep our eyes fixed on our Savior who suffered, died, and rose

again to save us. And, we have learned to hear the things of our Savior Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit in the Church. By God's grace we have remembered God's grace. We have learned and now we watch.

The Lord knows what He is talking about and warns us to keep watch in these last days for the enemies who would gladly ruin that faith, who would gladly nullify our salvation, and who would gladly make mockery of the Christian hope of eternal life in heaven with God. Watch out for the world and its false promises. Watch out for the devil and his slick lies and deceptions. Watch out for the flesh with its pride and ungodly appetites. The Lord says; "Be on guard! Be alert! Watch!"

Christians are to be on guard against these things, and yet, how often we have fallen into their traps. We have been busy talking when we should have been listening. We have been busy justifying our actions when we should have trusted the Lord who justifies us. We have been busy feeding our appetites and stroking our pride rather than taking the way of humility and suffering.

We are not good Christians at all, if there is such a thing, but we are Christians, thanks be to God. We can never be so alert, and so capable, and so wise as to have no need for the Lord who watches over us and protect us. Constant watchfulness is essential, but it is impossible for our weak flesh. The disciples of today would slumber off just as quickly as the disciples who nodded off shortly after the Lord's urgent caution to watch and pray (Matt. 26:38-45). Our watchfulness consists neither in worrying about the present conditions of society, nor in dwelling exclusively eternal life.

But, our watchfulness is in clinging to Christ as He grabs hold of us with Spirit and life in Word and Sacrament, the means by which He graciously preserves us to life everlasting. For we live right here, right now, in the reality of today. We are called in faith to be what God has given us to be, whether it is as a student, or housewife, in business, a neighbor, a friend, a worker, or a retiree. To be what God has given us to be, whether healthy, or sickly, rich or poor, living in a castle or a hovel. To be what God has called us to be, but strengthened by the Word and Sacraments, the means of grace in which He pours out His Spirit upon us to keep us steadfast in the true faith to life everlasting.

Being watchful is being alert to Christ. The day of His coming will be like a thief in the night. We are watching for Him to come and judge the quick and the dead. We are not like school children who goof off while the teacher is out of the room only to smarten up when they

hear she is coming down the hall. Christ's return will happen too quickly, too suddenly for anyone to get their act together at the last minute.

Instead of being on guard for a coming judge though, we are looking for the coming Savior. We know that there is nothing we can do to get ready if Christ comes only as a judge; for who can stand before Him? Instead, we look to Him as our Savior, and we keep receiving the blessings of Word and Sacrament; those means of grace that will strengthen and preserve us to life everlasting.

For we are a people who pray, "Come Lord Jesus" and "Thy Kingdom come, and, Deliver us from evil." And, it will happen just as Jesus said it will. We are a people who believe and trust what God has said about "the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints," and, "the forgiveness of sins." And we "acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins." And we look forward to "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." This is most certainly true.

Watchfulness is keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). We do this by hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments. We do this when our eyes do not glaze over in stubbornness and pride but turn repentantly to Christ, looking to Him for the forgiveness of sins.

Then we will go where He leads, right to the heavenly home that He has prepared for us. Not to be spectators, not to sit on the sidelines, like we were watching an sport event, but to participate, to dwell in Christ's glory, to receive Christ's glory and all of His blessings.

So we look where our Lord looks, so we look where our Lord looks upon us with His grace, right to that Word and Sacraments ministry that He gave to His people for all time. We look right where Jesus would have us look, at the real things of today, that will strengthen and preserve us to life everlasting. And by these things we will remain steadfast, keeping watch to the very end, keeping watch for that great day of the Lord's return. We will keep watch as the Lord continues to watch over us. Amen.

That the Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit pour out his richest blessings to all of us and fill us with peace. Amen