

Be Always Watching and Praying-- Luke 21:34-36

Our meditation from this morning is from the Gospel of Luke 19:34-36.

Let us hear these verses one more time: ³⁴**"But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."** Here ends the text for our meditation.

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

Friends, Advent begins on the Sunday closest to Saint Andrew's Day, which is Tuesday. Until Dec. 17, Advent focuses on "last things" - when Jesus shall return. Then we focus on His First Coming (Christmas).

A new church year proclaims a new start, and today's Gospel gives a sharp warning against ungodly living while giving rich promises to believers. Faith is not troubled at the coming destruction of the world; believers look forward to it! Yet all believers have a sinful nature that can be tempted and trapped by scattered schedules, indulgence, and anxiety.

We live in the "not yet" of heaven. What I mean is that we live by grace, we are saved, but we are not-yet in heaven. We are called to get ready NOW for His Return, which is not-yet. Advent is not about stirring-up holiday goodies, decorating homes, or even getting hearts ready to celebrate Christmas: it's about the Return of Jesus. So the question is Are YOU ready?

On this first day of Advent we remember His Threefold Coming. He was the One to Come, the One who will Return; and present now. We Know Christ Was the ONE to Come. God inspired the prophets to proclaim His First Coming. Such as today's Old Testament reading - Jeremiah's Righteous Branch.

There are over 300 direct prophecies for Jesus! God inspired the Apostles to proclaim and write that the Christ did come. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament like no other man could (John 20:31). Most importantly, He redeemed us completely by His Cross. We can sing or speak the Advent Introit in a past-tense: "Behold, our King HAS come, righteous and having salvation!" This is the message of the Christian Church: we preach that the only Messiah DID come as promised, and all of God's promises are true. We preach Christ, and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Friends, many of you have computers. You know what happens when you hit the delete key! Those people who are super-tech in computers can usually recover those files; sometimes even weeks later. God promises in Jesus' Name that your sins are not just deleted, they are wiped out completely and can never be recovered! This is the Gospel: Jesus died for ALL sins of ALL time.

We Know Christ is the One Who Will Return, exactly as described, for every Word He says is true. He will come with great power and glory, without warning. Many, even some bearing the name Christian, will be trapped unexpectedly.

Friends, Do you have mice in your houses? I hope you do not have. Here at church we have those rodents. Peanut butter works great in trapping them! Whack! They never knew what hit them! You, my fellow believers, can be caught by Satan in a similar way. Satan does not use peanut butter. Like a carrot on a stick, he dangles what you desire right before your eyes and leads you where he wants.

Maybe you want a relationship so bad, Satan leads you to go against the Commandments so you get what he wants. Maybe you want money; Satan will show you which corners to cut; and make you want more. Or maybe he wants you to gossip and become a false witness for Jesus.

Jesus warns us to be cautious. Satan wants to weigh-down hearts. Dissipation; wow, does that sound like this time of year? Do you feel pulled in a dozen directions at once, focused on today's crisis, or do you squander energy and time on what feels good?

Satan loves that trap: dissipation. Drunkenness is not only alcohol. The simple truth is that what has happened throughout the modern world is that Christians have been 'weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life.' Dissipation is wasting your life on things of no significance or value. We probably prefer to think of it as living like an alcoholic. Just drinking and wasting life on a grand scale. But dissipation actually is any pursuit that has no real value.

Another thing that distracts many Christians is the "worries of life". That is what weights most of us down. We worry about all sorts of things: the next paycheck, or we worry about the weather, or we worry about the pandemic, or we worry about the political situation in our country, or we worry about the economy, or we worry about our health. Life is every day, and its dangers, threats, worries, and fears are always clamoring for our attention. Which ones have your attention?

Jesus warns your heart will be trapped, and you will not be ready for His Return. You may be ready to celebrate a worldly Christmas, but not His Return. Jesus says, "be careful!"

How do we do that? Jesus gives the answer. Be always watching. For what? For the traps He mentions. Rather than remaining dissipated, begin your day with a good Christmas hymn and devotion: focus on Christ crucified for you! Rather than being intoxicated by the feelings, sights, foods, sounds, and the rest of this fallen world, sober yourself by remembering that God will destroy all these in an instant at Christ's Return. God gives us all these things to use for the Kingdom and our good. What else does Jesus say? Pray. Both that you will be spared the brunt of terrors AND that you will be able to stand in the Judgment.

That is, that your faith is based in the grace of the LORD our Righteousness when Jesus comes with all His holy ones. Hold on to your precious faith! Jesus will come to complete the history of the world, closing the Book of Life to all unbelievers, but granting you an open Door to heaven in the Cross. That's why Jesus says: watch and be ready for the end.

So how does God "strengthen our hearts so that we will be blameless and holy?" (Epistle) By coming in Word and Sacraments. We know Christ is the ONE Who Keeps Coming. He comes in His Word, the Holy Scriptures. Faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17), in study, liturgy, sermons, devotions. God's Word warns us: turn in faith before Grace ends. Turn away from turning every direction but Christ! God's Word also comes to calm our hearts in the forgiving power of Christ.

His promises of life and salvation in the Name of Jesus are true. He gives you the forgiveness, and also the power to forgive. Is there someone you have been angry at for a long time? Think about the meaning of Christmas, and sit down and write them a Christmas card. God has forgiven them all their sins: that's why Jesus came.

Jesus warned about anxiety. Now, I am not talking about depression, anxiety attacks, or clinical conditions but weekly worries or holiday fears. Trust that God can get you through. That's His promise to you! Drench yourself in His promises of life and salvation! He comes to YOU in His holy Word. Heaven and earth will pass away, but His promises will never pass away! He also comes to us in the means of Grace. Baptism (Matthew 28) and Holy Communion (Luke 22:19-20).

To conclude: One day Jesus will Return in great glory, and heaven and earth will pass away; but God's Word shall remain forever. Jesus tells us that that day is coming, and it will come upon everyone who lives on this planet. The temptations will be to fold up in fear, panic into unbelief, or to surrender your expectation that the day of the Lord will come soon, and to get busy living like everyone else in this world. That is why you are called to watch and pray.

Keep in your minds and hearts the following: the battle for your salvation has already been fought. Jesus fought it on the cross, and rose from the grave to declare the victory. Your sins have

been forgiven! Jesus has poured out on you the gift of everlasting life and resurrection from your grave, that is if the world does not end before your body goes to the grave. He poured those gifts out on you in your Baptism, and He feeds you with His body and blood each time we have it for the strengthening of your faith, and to regularly cleanse you of your sins."

The one thing we want to be sure to do, is to stand firm, that is, to be faithful. To do that we need to watch - and see in the world around us, particularly in the things that cause fear and trembling among men, the promised signals of our heavenly Father - intended to remind us of the truth and refocus us on the task at hand, and comfort us by showing His faithfulness - and the certainty of the end.

We want to straighten up and lift up our heads and look for our salvation to come, thereby clearly confessing Christ. We do that standing up and lifting up our heads by prayer - calling on Him to continue and complete His work in us and that He may accomplish through us all that He has planned. Mostly, we want to deliberately and consciously trust God, because "he that believes and is baptized shall be saved." And in order to accomplish all of that, we need to do as Jesus said, Watch and Pray. Amen

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen