

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, November 29, 2020

KEEPING ALERT FOR CHRISTMAS

Mark 13:24-37

Advent is a season of preparation. It is a time to look both forward to the future, and back to the past.

We look forward to Christ's coming again as we remember and celebrate His birth long ago. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised the apostles that one day He would return. The apostles asked the same question that has been asked in every generation since, "When will these things be?"

If only we knew exactly when Christ will return, we could pencil Him into our busy schedules. If only we knew when we could clean up our lives, so we would be ready. The problem is that we do not know. While we can count the number of days until Christmas, we cannot count the number of days until Christ will return. In fact, Jesus warns us about people who try.

THE WORD FROM JESUS IS TO KEEP ALERT. We do not know when He will establish His kingdom in this world. No one does. "About that day or hour," said Jesus, "no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Notice that even Jesus Himself did not know the day or time, but only God the Father. Jesus did not want His followers to waste time speculating. They had work to do. As do we...

To reinforce His point, Jesus told a story about a man about to leave for an extended trip. Since he was traveling a good distance, he was unsure when he would return. It could be in ten days, or ten months, or even ten years. He was unsure. Whenever he returned, though, he expected to find his house in order. One of the servants was given the job of doorkeeper. It was his responsibility to keep watch.

Since the doorkeeper did not know when the master would return, he had to stay awake. He had to keep watch. He could not allow himself to become engrossed with other activities. We get the impression that if the master returned and found the doorkeeper asleep, he would be in serious trouble. So it is with those who serve Christ. We do not know the hour.

If you were to travel to the southwest coast of Italy, you would find that ancient city called Pompeii. It lies a short distance from Mt. Vesuvius. This volcano has produced almost a dozen destructive eruptions. In 1631, an eruption killed 18,000 people. However, the most famous eruption of Mt. Vesuvius was in 79 A.D. Not only was Pompeii destroyed, but there were other cities nearby destroyed as well.

We understand through geological evidence that the City of Pompeii was covered with ash, and pumice, at a rate of six inches per hour. It was buried under nine feet of ash and pumice. For 1,700 years, Pompeii laid beneath tons of cinders, ashes and stone. Archaeologists uncovering the city found the remains of many bodies preserved in hardened ash. Some of the bodies were in deep vaults as if trying to escape the volcano's destruction. Other bodies were found in luxurious chambers. What is most interesting, however, is that a watchman who stood at the gate of the city was found at his post.

His hands were still clutching his weapon. He had been commanded by his captain to continue his watch, and even in the face of death, he remained at his post. This is a timely picture for us. We need to be alert, vigilant, watchful, waiting for Christ's coming kingdom.

Maybe, THE DELAY IN HIS RETURN IS TO GIVE US MORE TIME TO PREPARE. We look around, and see all the violence and tragedy in our world and ask, "Why doesn't Jesus come and put an end to all this?" That question is not unique to our time. Christians in every age have asked that same question. The early Christians who gathered in Mark's church to listen to the words of Jesus had just experienced some horrible, unthinkable events.

It was a time of crisis. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed. There were people claiming to be the messiah. Jesus had warned His followers there would be pretenders to His throne. In addition, there were those who had calculated the time was right for Jesus' return. It was a very confusing situation for the early believers. The absence of the Lord was keenly felt in their lives. They needed to once again hear the words of Jesus.

Of that day, Jesus told his followers, "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." In other words, when that day comes, they do not have to worry they

will miss it; everyone will recognize it. The questions for us is, will we be ready when we see “The son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory?”

A woman named Prudence Phillipson of England used this analogy. When her children were young, the floor of their playroom often became messy with games and toys strewn everywhere. Prudence got her children to clean up their toys, and games, by telling them she was going round the corner to the shop.

“When I come back,” she warned, “everything should be in its place.” She would then give each child a task before she left. The oldest child would be given more complicated tasks, while the simpler ones would go to the younger children. Then she would leave. The children would either do as she told them or else disregard her instructions.

When she returned, sometimes she would come quietly up the stairs and see through the half-open door they were quarreling or fooling around, or just absorbed in something else. Then there were other times when she would see her children were not quite finished with their task so she would go away to give them more time. Sometimes, she would shut the front door with a bang and hear sudden noises as they hurried to get the room straightened. At such times, one of the children would call out, “Not just yet, Mommy. Give us a little longer.”

In thinking about her children, Prudence writes, “Each Advent, I recall this experience with my children and wonder how many times the Lord has been close at hand, seeing the chaos of our world and longing to come, but waiting, sparing us judgment a little longer.” Perhaps we are given more time to get our lives in order.

THE GOSPEL FOR THIS WEEK IS THAT WE DO NOT HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL JESUS’ RETURN TO ENTER HIS KINGDOM. Jesus’ words about His return weren’t meant to frighten people. Instead, His words were meant as comfort. We know how the story ends; we can relax. But not too much.

We are to learn the lesson of the fig tree. By looking at the fig tree, we are able to tell when it will produce fruit. When its “branch becomes tender,” Jesus said, “and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you will know He is near, at the very gates.” Actually, He is at our personal gates this very hour.

From his book *Christmas Remembered*, Richards Beckman was a missionary in South America following graduation from seminary. Richards was newly married and didn’t

want to subject his wife, or himself to too primitive a way of life, so they took a few amenities with them. Among the supplies they took with them were an electric generator, and fuel to run it. The generator would provide them with light.

The native people had never seen a generator before and did not understand its purpose. To the native, it was a machine that made terrible noise and threw off a lot of smoke. Some of them even thought it was inhabited by demons.

In mid-December, Richards wired their house with sockets and lights, and even a set of twinkle lights. The locals gathered around their house since they had never seen such a thing. Many local people would travel, sometimes great distances, to see his light and the tree in his living room with the twinkle lights.

Richards also hung a light in the middle of the beautiful old church. Although people were used to gathering at the end of the day to sing, they were unaccustomed to singing with light at night. Richards tried his best to explain about electricity, but they just did not understand him. He tried to explain how power went through the wire and made the bulb in the church light up, because it was connected to the generator. He tried to explain that without the generator, the light would not work.

On Christmas Eve, as people began gathering for worship, he turned the light bulb on, and heard the usual “oohs” and “aahs” from the people. As he stood at the door following the service, one of the men who had the hardest time understanding electricity shook his head saying, “Now I see what Christmas is all about,” he said. “We are light bulbs, and Christmas sends the power to make us light up.”

That’s a petty good assessment of the situation. Even though Christ promised He would return to establish His kingdom, we do not have to wait until some far-off time to connect ourselves to Him. He is available to us, here and now. Be alert. Delay does not mean He is not coming. He is merely giving us time to get our lives together. We can get our lives together, best of all, by entering His kingdom today.

AMEN!