

KEEP AWAKE

Mark 13:24-37

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Series B)

November 21, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Last Sunday in the Church Year comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 13, verses 24 through 37. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us about the end, and I mean the very end. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 13, beginning at verse 24, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁴ “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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 rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Jesus loves you. He has redeemed you. He has paid for all of your sins with his precious blood. This is the gracious gift of God to you. It is not a matter of doing good works. You do not earn this gift. You cannot earn it. But he gives it to all who believe.

And for what purpose has he done this? Is it a gift for this life only? Is it simply so that we can go through our years on this earth feeling less guilty? No! It is so that we might belong to Jesus for all eternity. In the Small Catechism, Luther explains it this way: “In order that I might be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” The whole point of Jesus saving us is for eternal life.

Dear saints, this is our “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). This world is coming to an end. And when it does, we will look up, because it will mean that our redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28).

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We're considering the same theme as last week. The last few Sundays of the Church year always focus on the last things, like the return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the Judgment, the end of the world, and everlasting life in the new creation. This end times focus wraps up Christian teaching at the end of the Church year, and it also transitions into the season of Advent, which has, as one of its themes, the Second Coming of Jesus.

Last week we read in Daniel (12:1-3) about a time of tribulation and the resurrection of all mankind. In this passage from Mark, Jesus speaks of the very end. Before this reading, earlier in Mark 13, he also speaks of a time of tribulation. The disciples had asked him about the end of all things. Specifically, they wanted to know the "when" and what the signs would be (13:4). Jesus taught them that the signs of the end are tribulation, especially for the people of God. There would be wars, disasters, earthquakes, and famines (13:7-8). This is the tribulation for the entire world, and it's really just **"the beginning of birth pains"** (13:8). But, especially for the people of God, Jesus warns of persecution (13:9-13) and false teachers (13:6, 21-22).

To some degree, this tribulation has been ongoing since the time of the apostles. Of course there have been wars, earthquakes, and famines. There have also been persecutions and false teachers in the Church. This is the tribulation Jesus warned of. And it seems to be intensifying. And Jesus indicates that we should expect it to intensify until the end (13:19). Whenever we see these signs, it should remind us that the end is coming. But they do not tell us when exactly the end will come. We do not know how much worse it will get or when, exactly, the end will come. But we do know that our Lord Jesus reigns supreme over the entire universe now, and our gracious heavenly Father has shortened the days for the sake of his chosen people (13:20). That is, he has set a limit to how bad the tribulation will get and how long it will last. He knows these limits, but we do not.

So the signs of tribulation are not markers of time. They don't build a calendar of how long we have before the end. But in this passage Jesus tells us what will occur at the very end. This is what comes after our 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"** (13:24-25).

Many end times passages are figurative or symbolic. I don't think this is one of those passages. This should be understood literally, but we also should not go beyond what Jesus says. That is, we don't have to predict why the sun will not give its light. The first thing we will see is some kind of failure in the sky. Apparently the sun, moon, and stars will fail in some way. Maybe this means that the sun will be destroyed. If that happens, it will become abundantly obvious to all of the world that this world is ending. But whatever this looks like, exactly, this is the moment when we will go from "soon" to "now." For now, we live with the expectation of "soon." And we will live with that expectation right up until the moment the lights in the sky fail. At that moment, "soon" will become "now."

And Jesus tells us this so that we will not be terrified in that moment. I assume the rest of the world will be terrified. We might feel some terror too, because it sounds really scary, but we need not fear. Jesus tells us about this so that we will know what's happening. In the parallel passage in Luke, Jesus says, **"When these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near"** (21:28).

Then, after the failure in the sky, **"They will see the Son of Man"** —that's Jesus— **"coming in clouds with great power and glory"** (13:26).

The mention of the clouds is one of the reasons I say we should understand this literally, and not symbolically. When Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection, "He was

lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). Then two angels assured his apostles that Jesus “will come in the same way as [they] saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). So, since we know the part about the cloud is a literal statement, we also expect that the part about the sun, moon, and stars is literal.

“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” (13:27). It’s kind of fun to imagine what this will be like. Jesus doesn’t paint the whole picture for us, so it could be different than the picture in my head. But my imagination has angels flying all over the world and giving rides to all of God’s saints. Maybe that’s how it will be. Maybe not. But somehow, the angels will “gather his elect.”

This is also when the resurrection of the dead will occur. Jesus doesn’t mention the resurrection in this passage, but we have several other passages that connect the resurrection of the dead with Jesus’ return and the end of the world (Matt. 25:1-13; 1 Cor. 15:22-24; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:16).

This is what will happen at the very end: the lights in the sky will fail. Jesus will descend on a cloud. And the angels will gather you, his elect, from wherever you are. Even if you are in your grave, they will gather you to Jesus Christ. And together, we will behold our glorious Savior, and we will appear with him in glory.

We would like to know more about this. Or, at least, I would. And I assume most Christians want to know more. We especially want to know when this will happen. Jesus does not give us further details, but what he does tell us is fairly simple. Jesus is coming back. He will raise the dead. He will judge all mankind. He will transform his believing saints and bring them into everlasting life. He will also condemn unbelievers and cast them into everlasting contempt. This is fairly simple.

There are, of course, some passages that are difficult to understand. Part of that is because we have not yet seen how they will be fulfilled. And there is at least one statement in this text that I find difficult. It’s where Jesus says, “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (13:30). The most natural way to understand this, at least at the time, is that the end of all things would come during the lifetime of the apostles. This, obviously, did not happen. Some people, I suppose, would say that Jesus was just plain wrong. And if Jesus had failed to rise from the dead, like he said he would, then we should probably agree with them. But the fact is, Jesus did rise from the dead. Therefore, we should believe that he knows what he’s talking about, even if it doesn’t make sense to us. So there are a few other possibilities of what Jesus might have meant.

Some commentators ignore the problem. Instead of commenting on this verse, they just skip over it. That doesn’t really sit well with me, so I won’t do that to you.

Some suggest that Jesus was talking here about the destruction of the temple, not his return. This makes a little bit of sense, because, earlier, Jesus was talking about the destruction of the temple, and the temple was destroyed about forty years later. The trouble with this is that Jesus makes this statement amidst the verses where he is talking about the end of the earth. He also says, “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place,” not, “some of these things.”

I think a better explanation has to do with what Jesus means by “this generation.” Typically, a generation means people in a similar age bracket, maybe about thirty years or so. And they are often defined by a common attitude. You know how baby boomers are stereotyped a certain way, and millennials are stereotyped another way. Jesus often uses the word to refer to the common,

faithless attitude of his Jewish opponents. He does this about twenty times in the gospels. He refers to an “evil and adulterous generation” (Matt. 12:39; 16:4), a “faithless and twisted generation” (Matt. 17:17; Luke 9:41), and an “adulterous and sinful generation” (Mark 8:38). And he didn’t mean that everyone of a certain age was an unbeliever. Nor did he mean that all of the Jews were unbelievers. Rather, he was remarking on this common, unbelieving attitude of his opponents. In fact, of the twenty-some other times Jesus uses the word “generation,” not a single use is positive, or even neutral. They are all negative. In fact, in one place he even distinguishes between this “generation” and “the sons of light” (Luke 16:8). That is, Jesus does not even group his believers in with this “generation,” even though they were the same age. So if he is indeed using the word “generation” in the same sense that he always does, it means here that this unbelieving and hostile attitude against Jesus will persist until the very end. Even if the Jewish leaders who contended with Jesus die before his return, their legacy, or “generation,” will persist. This evil generation will contend with Jesus’ saints until the very end.

But when these things do take place, and this is the important point, this evil generation will pass away, but Jesus’s “words will not pass away” (13:31). Tribulation and persecution will end. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but [Jesus’] words will not pass away” (13:31). His promises cannot fail.

Our promises fail. Think about this. Every promise we make has the possibility of failing. You might promise to take your children to a basketball game, or you might promise to meet a friend for lunch. And you may fully intend to keep these promises, but any number of things could get in your way. You could forget. You could have a car accident. Or the world could end. When heaven and earth pass away, that’s going to interfere with a whole lot of people plans. In that moment, every promise of sinful man will fail. But the promises of Jesus will be confirmed forever. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but [Jesus’] words will not pass away.” In fact, heaven and earth passing away will vindicate every word of Jesus.

Now, since heaven and earth are passing away, what sort of people ought we to be (2 Peter 3:11)? How should we then live? Since we know that Jesus is returning, and we do not know when, Jesus commands us, “Be on guard, keep awake” (13:33). If we knew exactly when it would happen, we would be tempted to not get ready until we think we really need to. That would mean not living lives of faith and service. This would make us unprepared, not only for the return of Christ, but also our own temporal deaths, if those should come before Jesus’ appearance. It may be that our earthly bodies fail first. We will still experience the return of Jesus, along with those who remain alive until that day (1 Thess. 4:13-17), but our terminal moment will come before that. None of us really know when our terminal moment will come. So Jesus says, “Be on guard, keep awake.”

He compares himself to a man going on a journey, who leaves his servants in charge of his home. If they know when he is coming home, then they only need to be ready for that moment. They don’t really need to have their chores done all the time, and the doorkeeper doesn’t really need to stay awake every night. But since they do not know when, they need to be ready all the time.

And part of the reason they need to be ready at any moment, is because they do not own the home. There’s an etiquette to this. Suppose you’re going on a long journey to visit some relatives or friends. If you can, you try to plan it so that you arrive during normal hours. You don’t want to get there at three in the morning, especially if your hosts don’t know you’re coming. And if you do happen to show up unannounced at three in the morning, you probably don’t chastise

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them for not being ready. You don't complain about pizza boxes being out from the night before or them being asleep already. That's because it's their house, and they didn't even know you were coming. But it's different when you come back home. It's not rude to return to your house at three in the morning. You might not like being on the road that late, but it's your home; you can return anytime you want. And suppose you left some servants in charge. Most people don't really have servants anymore, so this might be more like hiring a house sitter. You come home at three in the morning and you find it a mess. There are pizza boxes on the couch, the dishes are unwashed, the toilet is plugged, and the beds are not made. Now you can complain, because it's your house, and your house sitter did not do what you hired him to do.

So what's the point? We are not the owners of this world. We are the house sitters. We act like we own the thing. But it belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ. He created it. He redeemed it. It's his. And he has told us that he will return at any moment. So it's not even like he's showing up unannounced at three in the morning. He has announced that he will return at any moment. Whenever it is, it should not be a surprise to us.

He has left us to care for his world. And he has especially left his Church to proclaim his saving truth to a lost and dying world. To stay awake means that we are ready for his return and looking forward to it. It means that we live in faith, believing that we are God's beloved children who have been saved by Jesus' blood.

And as we live in faith, waiting for his return, we do the works he has given us to do. Most of these works are not grand, world-changing works. Most of them are simple, everyday tasks. It means learning, especially for children, but also adults. Maybe Jesus will return while you are studying for a math test. Or the good works Jesus gives to you may be caring for your family, or praying, or serving customers. Maybe Jesus will return while you're cooking dinner. Maybe he will return while you're reading your devotions. Maybe he will return while you're stocking shelves at a warehouse. These are all good things to be doing when the master of this world returns. And in those moments, God will probably set an opportunity to share our blessed hope with another person. It may be your children, or a neighbor, or a coworker. You can declare to them the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name, so that they too will be ready when the master of this world returns.

This is the will of our Lord: that we would be watching and waiting, ready for his return. We should be looking forward to it with hope and not with fear, for this is our final deliverance. Jesus has made you ready by purchasing you with his holy and precious blood. You are his, and he has prepared an eternal home for you. So may we all live in hopeful expectation, with lives of faith and service. The return of Jesus is our blessed hope. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, **“Surely I am coming soon.”** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)