

*And Heaven and Nature Sing:
Watchfulness*

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

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Every three years Mark 13—that foreboding chapter about the desolating sacrilege, the sun and moon turning dark, stars falling from the sky and the Son of man coming in the clouds—is the text that opens the Advent season. We come to church expecting a heartwarming Advent theme, maybe angels singing on high or John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord, and this text from Mark is a shock to our system. We’re ready for “Joy to the World the Lord *Has* Come,” and we get instead, “You’d Better Be Prepared, for the Lord *Will* Come!” So, Advent creates tension. It expects us to hold together the sweet, warm message of the holidays with the frightful, alarming message of the future coming of the Son of man. We celebrate the birth of Jesus as a sweet, innocent baby and at the same time anticipate his second coming as judge of history.

Biblical scholars say that each gospel writer ends his gospel with a unique message. John, for example, ends with the farewell discourse, that intimate occasion where Jesus washed the feet of the disciples and prayed for them. Matthew, on the other hand, ends with the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples. Then Luke ends with Jesus resurrection appearances in Jerusalem. Then there’s Mark. Mark ends with this ominous warning. Be ready for the coming of the Son of man, he says. One writer calls this Mark’s “last will and testament” (Lamar Williamson, Jr., Mark, *Interpretation*, p. 238).

So here it is...Advent Sunday. Our sanctuary is beautifully decorated. I’ve always believed that this is one of the most beautiful sanctuaries in our city, and it is never lovelier than at Advent. This day marks the beginning of our preparation for Christmas Day, and Mark throws us a curve. He expects us to experience this creative tension between what happened and what will happen. He tells us that we must be watchful.

Some call Mark 13 The Little Apocalypse. It is a single chapter of apocalyptic literature, a special kind of biblical literature that uses exaggeration, embellished images, and outlandish symbols. Think the book of Revelation, probably the best-known example of apocalyptic literature. Here in Mark Jesus predicted the cataclysmic end of time. A desolating sacrilege will occur, he said. It will be a time of great tribulation. Nation will rise up against nation. There will be earthquakes and famines, wars, and rumors of wars. False Christs and false prophets will appear. Then after those days of tribulation, the sun will turn dark. The moon will not shine. Stars will fall from the sky. We will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory, and he will gather his elect from the four corners of the earth.

Jesus ended Mark 13 with a short parable about a fig tree. When the fig tree's buds begin to swell, Jesus told them, that is a sign that summer is nearing. So it is with the end of time, he said. When you see all these things taking place, you will know that the end is near. So, you must keep alert, he emphasized. Four times he told them to keep alert or to watch. And he also said this, something many who predict the end of time tend to ignore: "But about that day or hour *no one knows*, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The next time you hear someone say that he or she knows the date for the end of time, remember this verse. Jesus said that no one knows except God, not the angels, not even Jesus himself.

On this Advent Sunday, as our attention turns toward Christmas and the first coming of Jesus as an infant, Mark walks before us wearing a sandwich board. On the front, it reads, "Keep alert!" And on the back, it reads, "Watch!" So how do we do that? What does it mean to be watchful? Surely it is not standing idly and looking at fig trees. It's not counting stars or looking up biblical prophecy. Let me offer two suggestions on what it means for us to be watchful.

First, it means to put your energy behind something big, something that matters, something that is going to make a difference. If you want to be alert, put your energy into something for the Kingdom of God. Imagine your grandchild sitting on your lap one day and asking, "Granddaddy, what did you do with your life?" How will you answer that question?

This is the fourteenth year CNN has highlighted the efforts of ordinary people they call “heroes.” People nominate someone they think is making an extraordinary contribution to others. The nominees are narrowed down to ten. You can go online, read their story, and vote for your favorite. Voting ends tomorrow at midnight, by the way. This year they are being called Covid19Heros, and frankly it’s hard for me to pick a winner. They’re all winners. Like newspaper deliveryman Greg Dailey. He gets up at 4 a.m. each day to start his delivery route in East Windsor, New Jersey. It’s a second job, but he’s been doing it for 25 years and has become friends with many of the people on his route. When the pandemic and shutdown hit, many of his older customers were afraid to venture out. He tucked this note in the newspaper one day:

I understand during these trying times it is difficult for some to get out of their house to get everyday necessities. I would like to offer my services free of charge to anyone who needs groceries, household products, etc.

So far, Mr. Dailey has made more than 1,000 trips to the grocery store for senior citizens—for free. That’s a hero.

Last month as wildfires ravaged parts of California, six volunteer firefighters lost their homes to fire. While they were working around the clock to protect other families’ homes, their own homes were destroyed. In stepped Woody Faircloth. He and his seven-year-old daughter, Laura, founded a non-profit, RV4CampfireFamily, which provided RVs as temporary housing until the firefighters could get back on their feet. That’s a hero.

The Navajo Nation is a reservation that spans parts of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. Many live their traditional life and do not have running water, access to information, cleaning supplies, and medical care. They have been hard hit by the pandemic. Their infection rate was one of the highest per capita in the U. S. Sixty percent of their deaths have been people 60 and older. Linda Myers runs a non-profit that works with elderly Navajo. She works with donors to deliver food, masks, and other supplies to elderly Navajo. She’s started a program called Adopt-a-Native-Elder, which provides yarn for the production of rugs. Ms. Myers sells the rugs on her web page, and all the proceeds go back to the weaver. That’s a hero.

Here's what I love about the CNN Heroes. They're just normal people. Every one is just a regular person who saw a need and put their energy behind something big, something that matters, something that makes a difference.

Some of you are heroes in my book too. You may not be on CNN, but you've put your energy behind something big, and it is making a difference. That is how we live a watchful, alert life. An end is coming for everyone of us. Until it does, let's matter.

Here's a second suggestion. **Put your energy behind something little, something little that matters, that makes a difference.** It may not be the thing you choose to tell the grandchild sitting on your lap, but it still matters. Most of the work of the Kingdom of God is done here, in the small things, in little gestures that matter to others. Some of you have done grocery shopping for a neighbor. It's not going to make CNN, but does it matter? You bet it does. Some of you have helped out with childcare. You're not going to get on CNN either, but does it matter? You bet. Some of you have made and given away masks. These little things never make the news, but they too are important. And they too help us live a watchful, alert life. Yes, an end is coming. Until it does, let's matter.

Watchfulness. That's what Advent is about. As heaven and nature sing the glorious news of the birth of Jesus, we are challenged to be watchful. So, don't worry about the desolating sacrilege, the great tribulation, the darkening of the sun and moon, and stars falling from the sky. Jesus said that God will take care of that. Our job is to be watchful, to keep alert. And we can do that by giving our energy to the Kingdom of God, big things and little things. Then we can trust that God will take care of everything else.

It's Advent Sunday. Our sanctuary is beautiful. We begin our journey toward Christmas day with a shock from Mark 13. There will be plenty of time to focus on the sweet, warm message of the holidays. But not today. Today reminds us to be watchful.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we recall your birth, and we anticipate your coming again. We are alert. Use us in the work of your Kingdom. Amen.