

God's Watchfulness Toward Us

Mark 13:32-37

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

November 25, 2018 – Last Sunday of the Church Year



In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The theme of this morning's Gospel is a familiar emphasis throughout Holy Scripture, but especially so on this Last Sunday of the Church Year. That theme is *watchfulness* – watchfulness, and a desire to know when our Lord will be coming again to bring an end to this world and all things. Now there are three events Jesus mentions in this context. First is the destruction of the Temple, second is the Final Judgment, and the third is the cross. But in spite of the importance of the first two events, it's really the cross of our Lord Christ which is the most important of the three, for the cross defines and determines everything else – and without an understanding of the cross, nothing else makes any sense at all!

To be sure, it's the Sacrifice of Christ on the cross which renders the Temple and its sacrifices obsolete. It's the rejection of Christ and His cross which brings God's judgment upon Jerusalem. And, positively speaking, it's by the cross that God makes *you* well-prepared to face your own death and Final Judgment, and enables you to be watchful and eager for Christ's Second coming – whenever that Day and Hour might be. "Watchfulness," then, is the key word from this morning's Gospel. For here we are exhorted to the constant watchfulness of faith. We are to watch, be alert, and pray – three simple activities (or so it would seem) which correspond to the first Three Commandments.

To watch, be alert, and pray is nothing more than to fear, love, and trust in God above all things – above job, income, home, possessions, thoughts or feelings – yes, even family and friends. Watchfulness requires you to call upon God's Name at *all* times and in *every* circumstance with your prayers, petitions, praise, and thanksgiving. But in order to do this, you also have to give due diligence to God's Word and the preaching of His Gospel – gladly hearing and learning what He has to say on a regular basis. For by no means other than God's Word is anyone able to fear, love and trust in Him – or to call on Him in every need.

These are the most fundamental activities of the Christian life – the things to which you and I are called as God's children. "Take heed," therefore; "watch and pray!" Jesus tells us, "For you do not know when the time is – when that Day and that Hour will be." As Jesus spoke these words to His disciples, it would only be a matter of only a few days and hours before His own life would end on the cross – that moment in which the entire history of our world would find its true meaning and significance. How important it would be for the disciples of our Lord to watch, be alert, and pray with Him. But as you look at the

days which followed, see how pitifully these first disciples failed in every respect. Although they were surrounded on every side by the signs of His coming, they failed to see a one of them! I pray to God we might be more diligent.

Consider the night Jesus instituted the Holy Supper of His body and blood – and how afterward He was handed over – by His own Father, no less – to His own agonizing suffering and death. When He handed over His body and His blood to His disciples to eat and to drink – and through them to us – He was making it clear the kind of journey He was about to undertake – as well as the cosmic, Divine significance of His approaching cross and death. Our Lord's actions that night should have aroused the disciples to the utter seriousness of that Hour. Instead, those who were closest to Jesus failed Him in every way – and in the end, He was left utterly alone.

He was first left alone at midnight when He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and asked His disciples to watch with Him and pray – and they fell asleep three times. He was left alone when Judas betrayed his Friend and Master with a kiss. He was left alone very early in the morning as the rooster crowed, when – as He was being beaten and scourged – His right-hand man, Simon Peter, was so frightened, that with swearing and curses he denied any knowledge of his Lord – and dared the people around him to prove otherwise. And of course, by that time, everyone else – except for Saint John – had already run away and fled into the night. Finally, Jesus was left alone later that morning when He was once again handed over to Pilate by the leaders of His own people – who were supposed to be serving as the watchmen of Israel!

Now it would be quite easy to point fingers and find fault – though I should hope you would know better than that by now – but I doubt quite seriously that there is a one of us here this morning who would have done any better – and perhaps even far worse. How often have you, for example, refused to partake of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion – perchance because you were much too busy that day to take the time to come to the Divine Service? Or, when you do come to the Supper, how often do you give even a passing thought to the true significance of what you're doing – and then walk away from this Meal as though it has made no difference at all in your life?

How often have you despised God's Word and the preaching of it – by going to Church with reluctance or grudgingly – by your sleepiness or lack of attention – or by tuning out the Divine Service, and thinking instead of Sunday brunch, the pot roast in the oven, the football game, what so-and-so is wearing, or any one of a million

other things that might divert your attention from the one thing needful? How about all those opportunities you let pass you by to study God's Word, or to give Him thanks in prayer for all His many blessings? And while you may not have betrayed Jesus yourself, how many times have you betrayed friends and fellow Christians – even members of this congregation – with gossip, slander, or careless conversation? And when you hear such talk, how often do you – as Luther instructs us in *The Small Catechism* – defend others, speak well of them, and try to explain their actions in the kindest possible way? Is it not more likely that you've abandoned your neighbors by your silence – and in that silence left them alone and defenseless?

And though you may not actually have been the ones who handed Jesus over to His enemies, have you forgotten that His death on the cross was made necessary for you and your salvation – and on account of your sins and iniquities? After all, it was your stripes and punishment He received when He was wounded for your transgressions and died in your place. It was your sins and mine that took Him to the cross on that Day and in that Hour – because sadly, none of us have been nearly watchful enough, alert enough, or in prayer enough.

Jesus alone is the only One who has ever maintained a truly faithful vigil of watchfulness. He was always watching, always alert, and always in prayer. His focus at all times was on the good and gracious Will of His Father. He chose to live His life and go to His death as each of us must also do – that is, by faith alone – and not by trusting in His own knowledge, wisdom, or strength. And as with His prayer in the Garden – while His disciples were sleeping – Jesus always entrusted Himself entirely to the purposes of God, so that when the appointed Hour came He was ready – not by virtue of His own divine might, power and knowledge as the Son of God – but instead by His perfect faith in the Father – by His faith as true and perfect Man – in your place, for your sake, and as an example to us all.

In Him, therefore, the necessary watchfulness, as well as the Final Judgment, have already been fulfilled and satisfied for you. On the one hand, He allowed Himself to endure the entire punishment of hell so that He might suffer the sins of the whole world. And on the other hand, He lived perfectly the life that you could not – a life of perfect faith – full of fear, love and trust in God above all things – a life of perfect prayer, praise and thanksgiving – filled with constant attention to the Word and promises of God. The watchfulness to which you are still called on a daily basis – a readiness to bear the cross of Christ in your life as a living out of your Baptism – is thus made possible by Christ, who prepares us all through His Word of forgiveness, thereby removing what we were, and giving us Himself so that in the end you might be what He is – and

in Him receive all the good and gracious gifts God deigns to give you.

But the watchfulness to which each of us are called is a watchfulness which can only come about as you make diligent use of the means God gives us – the Word and Sacraments of Christ delivered to you by His servants and His Church. For just as the Old Testament people of God were prepared for the coming of Christ by the Temple and its sacrifices, so too God prepares you for the ultimate coming of Christ by His coming to you now in the Divine Service of preaching and Holy Communion. That's where our Holy Triune God has promised to be – that's where He makes His name and Presence available for you – and it's there where you've been given to eat and drink of the Sacrifice that was offered once and for all on the cross.

Thus are you exhorted to watch, be alert, and pray – so that in these things you might cling to our only hope in Christ, as you hear and receive His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. Rejoice all your days in His merciful presence, and then – as you are faithfully served by Christ through such means, He will use you to serve others and prepare them for the Final Judgment. In a very real sense, you who have both heard and received the Word and Sacraments of Christ become, in a manner of speaking, the “Word and Sacraments” of Christ for those who live outside His Church. Our Lord Christ thus comes to them through you so that He might bring them into His House where He will prepare them for His Second Coming at the end of time to take His children home with Him to His heaven.

Of course, our watchfulness and service to others is never what it should be. Even at best, we can claim to have done nothing more than was our duty. And beyond that, the fact of the matter is that we daily sin much and – as we readily confess – deserve nothing but punishment – here in time, and hereafter in eternity. But where our watchfulness and service are weak and pathetic, our Lord's watchfulness and Divine Service are ever trustworthy and certain. He continues to prepare you by His forgiveness, by the preaching of the Holy Gospel, in the water of your Baptism, and when He gives you to partake of His very own body and blood in anticipation of that great and glorious Banquet of Heaven – so that, already here and now, you might experience that Day when we will each fully participate in His divine Life and Salvation.

So to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling – and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy – to God our Savior, who alone is wise – be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen. And the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God the Father, and the Communion of His Holy Spirit, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

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