

November 29, 2020

First Sunday of Advent (B)

Are You Prepared?

Mark 13:32-37

**Opening words:** The lectionary is a three-year preaching cycle. Each year assigned a letter, A, B, and C. It is based on the liturgical calendar and various versions exist. Within the United Methodist tradition, we follow what is called the Revised Common Lectionary, which was first published in 1994. Each week, we are given four different reading from throughout the Bible. There is an Old Testament lesson, a Psalter, a New Testament lesson, and a Gospel lesson. The advantage of preaching the lectionary is two-fold. First, the various liturgical seasons are emphasized. Second, once the three-year cycle is complete, the congregation gets a balanced theology. This is the truth. I have never been a lectionary preacher. However, I am sensitive to the liturgical seasons. I have never not preached on the incarnation on Christmas Eve. I have never not preached on the resurrection on Easter. I am more of a series preacher because I liked the freedom. That all changes today. I have decided to follow the lectionary until the pandemic ends. I consider this to be part of my spiritual discipline.

Today, on this First Sunday of Advent, we begin a new liturgical year. This is year B, according to the lectionary. On this Sunday, the lectionary dictates us to look at the second coming of Christ. It is not a light topic. The Bible is filled with signs of Christ's return. It is one of those things that links generations. From the day Christ ascended into heaven, people began to wonder when he would return. So far, he is a no show. However, never forget, God does things in God's time. In his time, Christ will return. Our scripture reading for today is Mark 13:32-37. Let me call this message *Are You Prepared?*

**Mark 13:32-37**    **32** "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

**33** Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.

**34** It is like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

**35** "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. **36** If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.

**37** What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"

At the height of World War II Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was imprisoned for taking a stand against Adolph Hitler (1934-1945). Yet, he continued to urge fellow believers to resist Nazi tyranny. A group of Christians, believing that Hitler was the Antichrist, asked Bonhoeffer, "Why do you expose yourself to all this danger? Jesus will return any day, and all your work and suffering will be for nothing." Bonhoeffer replied,

"If Jesus returns tomorrow, then tomorrow I'll rest from my labor. But today, I have work to do. I must continue the struggle until it's finished." If you can understand that simple story, then you can understand this message. Let us look at our scripture reading together.

We find ourselves today in the thirteenth chapter of Mark. Since there are only sixteen chapters in Mark, let me state the obvious. It is near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. The fourteenth chapter of Mark tells us the Passover was only two days away. That would be Jesus's final Passover. In other words, this is the beginning of the end. While Jesus could have spoken on any topic, love, forgiveness, or mercy. Jesus speaks of his return. That means the Second Coming was an important topic to Jesus. The verses prior to our reading are prophetic in nature. They are not the only ones in the Bible. The Bible is filled with signs of the end of time. Based on those signs many have tried to expose the great secret. History tells us more than 47 different groups or individuals, not all Christian, have announced dates when Christ will return. In that list is the founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703-1791). Six others say Christ will return in some futuristic date. For example, American self-proclaimed psychic and astrologer Jean Dixon (1904-1997) said Christ will return this year, 2020. Why not! 2020 has offered us so many surprises. Did you know the Christian, Islamic, Bahai', and Messianic Jewish worlds are all waiting for the return of Jesus? In my life, I have known people who are convinced they have the key to unlock the great secret.

Years ago, I received a phone call from a man. His name was John and he drove a truck for a living. He traveled from coast to coast. I thought he was calling me about his daughter's failed marriage. Her story was not pretty. We set up a time to get together. When the hour and day came, he did not want to talk about his daughter's unhappiness. He was calling me about the Second Coming. He said, "Russ, I was driving through the Midwest. The crops should have been in full growth, but they were not. They were stunted by the drought." I thought about those withering plants and wondered if it was a sign that Christ is returning soon. What do you think? Do you think Christ is returning soon?" I said, "He may, but I do not know. The Bible says not even Jesus knew when he would return. I doubt if God is going to tell me ahead of time." He is not the only one.

When I was young, they started putting bar codes on the side of products for inventory purposes. The rumor was spread that the bar codes were a sign of the beast. Some believed people would be required to get that bar code. People have always been looking for signs of the Second Coming of Christ. When I was in high school, a Christian group reserved the auditorium of the school to show a movie. It was called *A Thief in the Night*. It showed what would happen on the day that Christ returned. The believers would suddenly be taken, and the none-believers would be left behind. The movie had a certain shock value. When the movie ended, a boy stood up and gave his testimony. Then he prayed and gave an alter call, reminding everyone the end was near. Many believe the end will come with a nuclear war. My wife wonders why Christ did not

return during the Second World War. Things were so bad and so many were suffering. Have you ever wondered when Christ will return? People still ask me on a regular basis if Christ is returning soon. I give them the same answer I gave John. "He may, but I do not know. The Bible says not even Jesus knew when he would return. I doubt if God is going to tell me ahead of time." Billy Graham (1918-2008) once said, "*The Second Coming is the only beam of hope that shines in an ever-darkening world.*" If you believe that someday Christ will return say, "**Amen!**" Yet, the scripture lesson for today is not about when Christ will return.

The scripture lesson for today is not just about the Second Coming of Jesus. The scripture lesson for today is about what we should be doing until Christ returns. These are Jesus's own words. The Master says it clearly. The exact time of his return are unknown. Not even the angels know. Not even Jesus, himself, knew what he would return. The only one who knows is God and we know two things about God. First, God can keep a secret. Second, God does things in His own time. So, you better get comfortable while you wait. The only thing we are to do is live every day like it is the last day. Verse 33 says, "*Be on guard. Be alert.*" He is like a homeowner who leaves his in servants in charge, not knowing when he will return. He could return in the morning. He could return in the evening. He could return mid-week, or he could return on a weekend. Any day could be the day, so they must always be ready. The same is the return of Christ. We do not know when, so we must always be prepared. So, let me ask you the question of the day: are you prepared?

### **Are you prepared socially for the Second Coming of Christ?**

Are you prepared socially for Christ's Second Coming? One of the great Bible stories comes from the fourth chapter of Genesis. How well do you remember your family history? Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. They came from the same biological parents but they, personally, were completely different. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. In time, both men sacrificed to God. Cain brought fruit; Abel brought meat. You can call it favoritism, but God preferred Abel's offering, the meat. (Can you really blame him?) Cain gets his feelings hurt and positions himself to do something ugly. The story ends when Cain kills Abel. This story can teach us a variety of things. One of those things is the value of human relationships. How are all the relationships in your life? Albert Einstein once said, "*physics is easy relationships are complex.*"

How many broken relationships do you have in your life? Does everyone in your life respect you? How many people in your life just tolerate you? I am not just talking about your siblings. I am talking about everyone, your parents, children, neighbors, and co-workers. Are there words you would like to say to someone, but you have not had the courage? Let me give you some pastoral advice. Do not wait to mend those broken relationships. If Jesus returns today, would you be prepared socially? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

### **Are you prepared personally for the Second Coming of Christ?**

Are you prepared personally for the Second Coming of Christ? In other words, what do you still want to do? The girl who led me to Christ was named Susan. I have told that story many times. I was a senior in high school. Susan had a sister by the name of Vicki. She was a strong Christian too. One evening we gathered in her parent's basement and talked about the faith. I was hungry for the Gospel in any form. Each one of us agreed that someday Christ was going to return. Vicki said, "I know Christ is going to return, but I hope he waits a while. I still want get married and I still want to have children." She laughed, but she made a good point. Is there anyone here today who hopes Christ does not return too soon?

What do you still want to do with your life? Is there some place you would still like to go? Is there some place you would like to go to again? Is there someone you would still like to meet? Is there some book you would still like to read? Is there some language you would still like to study? When Thomas Jefferson died, he was studying German. Let me give you some pastoral advice. Do not stop living! It is a great big world. Are you prepared personally for the Second Coming of Jesus? If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"**

### **Are you prepared spiritually for the Second Coming of Christ?**

Are you prepared spiritually for the Second Coming of Christ? You do not have to be a Civil War expert to know the name Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. He was respected by both friend and foe for his courage during battle. He was once asked about the source of that courage. This was his response.

**My religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed. God (knows the) time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter where it may overtake me. That is the way all men should live, and then all would be equally brave.**

It is interesting to note that Jackson died eight days after he uttered those words. He was shot by one of his own pickets. That shot caused him to lose his arm which lead to pneumonia. Are you prepared spiritually for the Second Coming of Christ? If you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior say, **"Amen!"**

Several years ago, retired NASA engineer Edgar C. Whisenant wrote a book called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. The book, which he self-published, placed the expected date of the Rapture between September 11 and September 13 of 1988, and became a massive bestseller. By the time the end of the year was reached, more than 4.5 million copies had been sold. Whisenant was certain he had the date right. He said, "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town. I would stake my life on Rosh Hashanah 1988." Obviously, he was wrong.

Whisenant's later books predicting the Rapture in 1989, 1993, and 1994 did not sell nearly as well as the first one—but he kept right on making those predictions despite the clear teaching of Scripture that we are not meant to know the date and time of Christ's return. However, we are called to live every day as if that were the day Christ would return. Do you remember the quote from Billy Graham? The great evangelist said, Billy Graham once said, "*The Second Coming is the only beam of hope that shines in an ever-darkening world.*" And all of God's prepared people said, "**Amen!**"