

“Truth in the Innermost Being: True Followers”

Mark 13:1-8, 32-37

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, Jr.

We are in the season of Lent, and we are on our way with Jesus to Jerusalem. As we travel this road together, Jesus teaches his disciples about the kingdom of God and the things that are to come.

Today’s reading from Mark tells about the time when Jesus will return, and what his followers are supposed to do until that time. This passage is sometimes referred to as the “Little Apocalypse.” It’s called this because Jesus provides his disciples a warning about the things that will play out in Jesus’ life about the final coming of Christ at the end of the age.

As this scene opens, Jesus is leaving the Temple with his disciples in tow. One of the disciples turned to admire the Temple, the great stone building that served as the heart of Jewish worship. This Temple, built by Herod the Great, was huge.

- It dwarfed many of the temples to pagan gods found elsewhere in the Roman Empire.
- It’s easy to understand how these disciples, these simple men from the rural countryside of Galilee, would be impressed by the magnificent stone Temple.
- And it should also be easy to understand how shocked they were to hear Jesus speak of the Temple’s coming demise: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2).

Current events in our world give us a greater appreciation for the shock they must have felt.

- It was just over a month ago that the US stock market was hitting record highs. New York, the financial capital of the nation (if not the world) was in fine form.
- Consumer confidence was up and people were spending at healthy levels.
- Who would believe these words: “Do you see this great center of finance and the heights to which it has climbed? All will be thrown down...”
- Who would have believed our “cathedrals of consumerism,” the shopping malls and centers, being shut down by a virus we weren’t expecting.

I think we have a better feel now for how stunned those disciples were when Jesus told them the Temple would be destroyed. Which led to the question they asked Jesus when they were alone with him: When will this take place and how will we see it coming? Those are reasonable questions. It’s part of human nature to want some certainty about the future. Jesus’ answer, though, was what I would call “non-specific.” Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines and natural disasters...these are the kinds of things our world experiences on a fairly regular basis.

It is these signs, and others that Jesus talks about in Mark 13, that become the focal point for many people when they read this chapter. There have been a fair number of folks who tried to predict the end of the world and the return of Christ based on this and other passages.

- William Miller was one of these men. He was an Adventist preacher from upstate New York in the first half of the nineteenth century. Miller set a date: October 22, 1844. Some of his followers were so convinced he was right that they sold or gave away their possessions and prepared to meet Jesus.¹
- One of the more recent end of the world predictions wasn’t based on the Bible. It came to us from what some claimed was an ancient Mayan prophecy setting the date of December 21, 2012, as the day the world would end. Like the William Miller prediction before it, and many in between, it’s fairly obvious by now these supposed prophecies were wrong.²

There will continue to be people who will try to pinpoint the end of the world or the return of Christ.

For myself, I think it’s really a waste time, and here’s why. A little further on in Mark 13 we find these words from Jesus:

¹ Robert McNamara, “History of the Millerites, Devoted Sect Believed The World Would End on October 22, 1844,” ThoughtCo., May 14, 2019, article on internet, <https://www.thoughtco.com/millerites-definition-1773334>, accessed 26 Mar 2020.

² “Beyond 2012: Why the World Didn’t End,” NASA, Dec. 22, 2012, article on internet, <https://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/2012.html>, accessed 26 Mar 2020.

³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

This is really the crux of the “Little Apocalypse,” for all the followers of Jesus, as we look to the future. Don’t dwell on when Jesus is coming, just “Stay awake!” and be ready.

Of course, saying stay awake is easier said than done. We all have times of the day when it’s hard to keep from sleeping. From falling asleep after lunch, to falling asleep in class, nodding off on the job...even falling asleep during a sermon about not falling asleep...it can be difficult to stay awake. We’re all human, our minds wander, we get tired, and we struggle to stay alert.

We are not alone in this struggle. Even the disciples of Jesus failed the “stay awake” test, and they failed when it counted most. Lutheran theologian and teacher Elisabeth Johnson outlined the ways the disciples failed Jesus by pointing to each watch of the night that Jesus spoke about. In each instance, the disciples were unable to meet the watchfulness challenge.

At evening they gather for the Passover meal, and Jesus reveals that one of them is about to betray him. “Surely not I?” each one says.

At midnight in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus takes aside Peter, James, and John and asks them to stay awake and watch and pray with him, yet three times Jesus returns to find them sleeping. After the third time, Judas arrives with the guards who arrest Jesus, and the rest of the disciples all desert him and flee.

At cockcrow, Peter comes to the bitter realization that he has denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus had predicted.

And finally, at *dawn*, the chief priests and scribes bring Jesus before Pilate to be tried, and Jesus stands utterly alone. Not one of his disciples waits and watches with him.³

Jesus wants us to stay alert. This is the point of the parable he told about the master of the house who travels far from home, “...when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch” (Mark 13:34). Disciples of Jesus are to be alert, awake, prepared for the Master’s return. But waiting is not to be passive. The model of waiting Jesus gives us is what we can call “active waiting.” Like the slaves in the story, we are called to be at the Lord’s work while we wait for Christ to come and bring God’s Kingdom on earth to final fulfillment.

Many years ago, a group of legislators in colonial New England held a meeting. Their meeting rapidly descended into darkness because of a solar eclipse that no one predicted. Some panicked and sought to adjourn the meeting. Then one of them said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought.”⁴

In times of darkness, true followers of Jesus should be running for the candles, bringing the light of God’s love to the world. We should be busy doing the things Jesus calls us to do. And it’s not like we don’t know what to do—we do the things Jesus did, like:

- Showing love to others.
- Seeking justice for the poor and oppressed.
- Forgiving as we have been forgiven.

Jesus will return one day; that should bring us great comfort. But too much preaching and teaching about the return of Christ focuses on fear and judgment by an angry God, instead of seeing Christ’s coming as the return of a loving Master. When we focus too much on the fear and judgment, we miss the bigger picture Mark is drawing for us, one that contains very good news:

- The good news is that even though we are weak,
- even though we can’t stay awake,
- even though we fail at the loving things Jesus calls us to,

³ Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Mark 13:1-8, 24-37, Working Preacher, March 29, 2020, article on internet, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4239, accessed 24 Mar 2020.

⁴ Stephen R. Montgomery, “Mark 13:32-37, Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 431. Quoted from Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 242.

- the story of Jesus Christ is the story of God’s mercy and grace available for all.

We are to wait actively and eagerly for the return of the Lord.

Some years ago, a man named Rodger made plans to visit with some friends. He did not set a definite time for his arrival—as many of us do—and said he’d be there around “five-ish.” As he pulled up the driveway, Rodger saw his friends’ nine-year-old daughter, Catherine, jumping up and down in the front window. He waved, and she waved back excitedly. When he got in the door, Catherine hugged him and quickly dragged him off to see her latest artwork from school.

Catherine had worked hard that day to prepare for Rodger’s arrival. Knowing that he was coming to dinner, Catherine worked with her mom to clean up her room and to get dressed in her favorite clothes. She took the time to write out an agenda of everything she would do with Rodger, every game, every book, every activity. “Thank goodness you arrived when you did,” Catherine’s mom said. “Catherine was making us crazy preparing and waiting for you to arrive.”⁵

The point of the story, of course, is that we shouldn’t obsess about the “when” of Christ’s return; our job is to prepare, like Catherine did for Rodger’s arrival, so we are ready all the time to welcome the Lord.

In the story of the master’s return, Jesus showed us what it means to be a true follower.

- True followers of Jesus don’t focus on **when** Jesus will return.
- True followers are content to know **that** Jesus will return.
- True followers of Jesus don’t wait around doing **nothing** until the Master returns.
- True followers wait **actively** by doing the things that show the love of God to those who need it most.

Our hope this day, and every day, is in the God who came to show the meaning of love; the God who is with us still, through all the storms of life; the God who will one day return to be with His people throughout eternity.

May all of us seek the ways Christ calls us to be about His business, so that we can one day hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into your master’s rest.

In the name of Jesus.

Amen.

⁵ Rodger Y. Nishioka, “Mark 13:32-37, Pastoral Perspective,” in Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Eds., *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 432