

Oh, You'd Better Watch Out!

Mark 13:24-37

It always feels strange beginning Advent in November. But the stores have been decorated for Christmas since October, so why not?

If you're one of those people who try to figure out what my sermon will be based on the sermon title, you may have noted that this morning's sermon title is also the title of a popular Christmas. Studies show that listening to Christmas carols boosts our spirits, regulates our heart rate and breathing which, in turn, reduces stress. In other words, listening to Christmas music is good for us.

Anyway, "Oh, you'd better watch out" sounded to me like a good sermon title on the first Sunday of Advent where the text is Mark 13:32-37.

Now hearing that text, go back and recall the lyrics to Santa Claus is coming to town... "Oh, you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town." And don't forget these lines, "He's making his list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice."

Some people think of God that way. And they read the same kind of warning from the song in our lesson for today. Each year we begin the season of Advent focusing on Jesus' words about his Second Coming rather than his birth.

Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection. But he wanted them to know he would be returning for them. Jesus says in our lesson that we are to live in a spirit of watchfulness like children eagerly waiting for Christmas Day. We are awaiting the return of our Lord.

We need to put Christ's words into perspective, however. Many well-meaning followers of Christ have abused Christ's teachings about the day of his return. **First, nobody knows when Jesus will return.** The angels in heaven don't know. Even Christ himself did not know. The early church thought it would be in their lifetime. It's been more than 2,000 years.

Which shouldn't surprise us. There's so much that God hasn't revealed to us. We don't even know what tomorrow might bring.

It's a waste of time trying to figure out just when Christ will return. We don't even know for certain what this evening will bring. Let it go. Trust God and let it go. Jesus was insistent nobody knows when his return will be.

And we really can't say much about what will happen when that day does come. I know there are some people who are enamored with the *Left Behind* series of books and movies. Years earlier there was Hal Lindsay's classic, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. And my favorite, *Eighty-eight Reasons Why the Rapture Will Definitely Occur in 1988*.

The scriptures provide us with very few details about the nature of Christ's return, and much of what we do have is written in a kind of code that can be widely interpreted or misinterpreted as the case might be.

Revelation 19:14 describes the armies of heaven going to war at the end of time "riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean." The writer wrote using signs and symbols from the world he knew. We shouldn't look to Revelation for a literal description of how Christ will return.

We can be sure of one thing, though. If the return of Christ means the end of life as we know it, it'll be dramatic. Other than that, we don't know when it will happen and we don't know the details of what's going to happen. So rather than sitting around worrying about it, Christians should focus on how Christ wants us to live here and now.

That's really the purpose of today's lesson from Mark. To remind us of two essential truths: One, **the future is in God's hands, not ours**; and two, **we can trust God for the future**.

Just as we don't know when Christ's return will be, we also don't know what the future may hold. Some people are excited about the future. They see cures for Covid, cancer, and all sorts of diseases. They see human beings routinely living in good health 100 years, 200 years or more.

Will this occur? No one knows. But we do know that the same God who sent a tiny babe 2,000 years ago to redeem our world is the same God who holds the future. We do know that God loves His creation with a love that can't be comprehended. We do know that if we make good decisions about the future and are faithful to His Word and trust that God holds the future in His hands, all will be well with our soul.

The century in which Jesus spoke these words were just as turbulent as ours. In 70 AD, about the time Mark was writing his Gospel, the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem to punish Israel for an earlier insurrection. At the same time, the tiny Christian community was being severely persecuted.

The times were dark, so dark that most Christians believed that Christ would surely return in their lifetime. But that didn't happen. Which doesn't mean that we should ignore Christ's words about his return. He wants us to live expectantly in spite of the uncertainty of when He will actually return.

That day is coming, and it will be grand and glorious does. So, you better watch out. You better get ready. God's in charge, can be trusted, and has a plan. "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"