Watching and Waiting

Mark 13:32-37

Prayer of Illumination

God of our people, and Lord of every nation, let your Word ring out from the mountains and your Spirit shine forth in the earth, so that all may hear your teaching and all may do your will as we watch, stay alert, and wait for your return. Amen.

It's official! We have entered into the Christmas countdown period.

Every day now we will see it in the newspapers and hear it on the radio and television, "24 shopping days until Christmas,"

"23 shopping days until Christmas,"

"22 shopping days until Christmas."

All around us there are signs that Christmas is coming.

• Stores are filled with Christmas decorations

• Santa is at the mall

• Christmas music is playing on the radio and television

• Christmas cards are arriving in the mailbox

• Christmas parties at work, at school, and at church
Today there are plenty of signs that Christmas is coming, but 2000 years ago when Jesus was born, there were no big signs to announce that it was going to happen. There were no ads on the radio or TV saying "Coming soon! A Savior will be born in a stable near you!" When Jesus was born, many people were surprised! But as word of his birth spread, some people remembered that prophets had told them that God was going to send a Savior. They knew that this baby, born in a stable, was God keeping His promise.

Today Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas. But it is also a time to remember that Jesus promised that he would come again. We don't read much about that in the newspapers either, and we don't hear much talk about it on the radio or television, but Jesus told us to be alert, be prepared, and to watch expectantly for his return.
Mark 13:32-37 (CEB)

32 “But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. 33 Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t know when the time is coming. 34 It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. 35 Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. 36 Don’t let him show up when you weren’t expecting and find you sleeping. 37 What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!”

Throughout history we have heard that the Second Coming of Christ is near.

When the disciples were with Jesus for the last time they asked, “Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?” Jesus told them, “You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business (Acts 1:6-7).”

Around the year 1000 predictions of the coming of Christ filled the air.
The people were so sure of the predictions that they didn’t plant their crops, buildings lay decaying, and people were left starving.

In the 1500’s Martin Luther wrote, “We have reached the time of the white horse of the Apocalypse. This world won’t last any longer…”

Christopher Columbus was also a student of biblical prophecy. He wrote a volume called “The Book of Prophecies,” in which he predicted that the world would end in 1556. He wrote, “there is no doubt that the world must end in one hundred fifty five years.

Over the years many have given times and dates

After 14 years of studying the Bible, William Miller became convinced that Christ would return in 1843. When Miller announced April 3, 1843 as the day, some disciples went to mountaintops, hoping for a head start to heaven. Others were in graveyards, planning to ascend in reunion with their departed loved ones.
Philadelphia society ladies clustered together outside town to avoid entering God's kingdom amid the common people.

When the sun rose on April 4, the Millerites, as they were known, were disillusioned, but they took heart.

Their leader had predicted a range of dates for Christ's return. So they expectantly waited until the second predicted date of March 21, 1844.

The devout continued to wait until the third predicted date, October 22, 1844, but again they were disappointed as it also passed.

William Miller is not alone. Since then many others have tried to predict when Jesus will return.

One day a priest and a rabbi from local parishes were standing by the side of the road holding up signs.

The rabbi’s read, "The End is Near!"

The priest, on the other side of the road, held up a sign which read, "Turn before it’s too late!"

They planned to hold up their signs to each passing car.

The first driver yelled, "Get a job."
The second, immediately behind the first, yelled, "Leave us alone you religious freaks"!

Shortly, from around the curve, they heard screeching tires and a splash followed by more screeching tires and another splash.

The rabbi looked over at his companion and said, "Do you think we should try a different sign"?

The other responded, "Perhaps, 'Bridge Out' might be better?"

I’m sure people will continue to try to predict when Jesus will return.

However, I think they are missing the point!

Jesus makes it very clear, not one will know the time.

Jesus told us to be ready no matter when His return will occur.

Three times in our passage he tells us, “Be alert!”

He tells a parable about a man who goes on a journey.

He doesn’t tell his servants where he is going or when he will come home again.

He leaves his servants in charge of his home and property and gives them work to do while he is away.
He then leaves and his last word to his servants as he closes the front door is to be diligent and ready for his return, whenever that might be.

When I was an older teen, my parents would often leave my sisters and me at home on the weekends while they went to visit a critically ill relative in North Carolina.

They always gave us careful instructions on what we could and couldn’t do to do while they are away.

And we knew the house was to be neat and clean upon their return.

When they were finally gone, there is that wonderful feeling of freedom.

The whole house was ours.

We could eat what we wanted when we wanted, leave our clothes lying all over the place, stay up as late as we liked and sleep in till lunchtime.

However, on Sunday we did a thorough cleaning.

The dishes were done, the trash was taken out, the clothes were picked up, the beds were made, and the house was dusted and vacuumed.

We knew when they were coming back and we knew we had to be ready for their return.
It would have been too late to get into a hurry to make beds, wash dishes, sweep floors and put in a load of washing if we had waited until they pulled into the driveway on Sunday evening.

And if they had returned unexpectedly on Saturday evening, we would have probably been in big trouble!

In hind sight it would have been better to keep things picked up along the way, after all, they could come home at any time.

But as a teenager, it was more fun to wait and do the mad dash on Sunday.

Jesus is warning us in the parable to always be ready because we don’t know when He is returning.

Our plan of waiting till the last minute would not work for Jesus’ return.

He warns us to keep alert and be ready at all times.

We are to be watching and waiting.

You see there are two kinds of waiting - passive waiting and active waiting.

Let me illustrate what I mean in this way.

Let’s say you are at the train station and people are waiting for the arrival of a train.
You notice that in one corner of the waiting room there is a man who has dozed off.

He is waiting for the train but while he is waiting he is bored and so has decided to catch up on a little sleep.

He is *passively* waiting.

You also spot a little boy waiting for the train.

He is excited about the arrival of the train and then riding on it.

He can’t sit still and constantly goes to the station door and looks up and down the tracks,
he chatters to the other people waiting about the arrival of the train,
he even asks the sleepy man if he is getting on the train too.

The little boy’s waiting is full expectation and excitement.

He is anticipating the arrival of the train at any moment.

He is *actively* waiting.

Likewise as we await the second coming of Christ, we can choose to wait passively;
sitting in wait, flicking through magazines, day dreaming a bit,
just filling in time.
This kind of passive waiting doesn’t require much energy or attention.

It requires no commitment on our part.

If God wants us, he knows where to find us.

There is no need to bother about prayer, worship, mission, the Bible, or with deliberately living the Christian life…we are just waiting.

Or we can be like the little boy, waiting with eager expectation.

This waiting involves prayer, worship, mission, the Bible, and deliberately living the Christian life.

You know that Jesus will return, and like the servant in the parable, his absence doesn’t mean forgetting about the master and what he wants you to do,
rather you actively wait,
ready and prepared for whenever that moment of his arrival might be.

Jesus' parable tells us to watch and be ready,
while at the same time reminding us that we have jobs to do while he is away.

You see the work of the kingdom of God,
the work of the Master,
has been entrusted to you and me, his servants.
And he expects us to be faithful servants.

There is little point in worrying and fretting over when the master will return. The most important concern we have is that we faithfully carry out the work he has given us to do so that when he does return he will find us faithfully working on those tasks he has given us. Jesus is trusting us to carry out his work until he returns. He has instructed to do unto others as he did unto us; when we give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, give clothes to the poor and visit those who are sick or in jail we are doing Jesus’ work. We are preparing the way for His return. As we make disciples of all nations, we are actively working and waiting for Christ’s return.

I believe we need to recapture the sense of eager anticipation about the second coming of Christ that was present in the early church.
During this Advent season, we need to listen to God calling us to look beyond "today and tomorrow" to the time when Jesus will come back and usher in God's kingdom in all its fullness.

This morning we are reminded that we are preparing for much more than Santa and the exchanging gifts; we are preparing for much more than the celebration the birth of the Christ Child.
We also are preparing for his promised return, that grand and wonderful day when there will be no more pain or sorrow or suffering or death.
We are getting ready for an event which has no equal in human experience and for which we should be waiting with eager anticipation.

As I tried to picture this sense of eager anticipation, I remembered what it was like for me and my sisters to wait for Christmas morning when I was a child.
The closer it got to Christmas, the more excited we became.
I still remember how difficult it was to fall asleep on Christmas Eve.
I suspect you can as well.
Now, if we were to multiply that sense of anticipation by a thousand, we might be able to get a sense of the anticipation we should have surrounding Jesus' return to earth.

This Advent season I want to challenge us to expand our Christmas preparations to include Christ's coming back to earth in power and glory. No one knows when that will happen, but we do know that it will happen. Allow your eager anticipation of that event to spill over into your anticipation of this year's Christmas celebration. I promise you that such a vision will change the way you live from day to day.

Remember Jesus said, “Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t want him to find you sleeping! Let’s be ready!”

Let us pray as we remember Mary’s prayer: O Lord God, hurry please. We wander in darkness with evil all around us. Give us light. We come to this place with expectation waiting here for you. We lift our hands and hearts in praise, knowing we need you. We wait upon you Lord, we are waiting for the day when there will be no more pain and sorrow, not more fear or hate, no more struggles, no more sickness or death. Lord we are waiting here for you, help us to actively waiting in preparation for your return…we are waiting here for you to come in your majesty and all your glory. Come Lord Jesus, come. Amen