

KEEP WATCH
Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year, 2021
Mark 13:24-37

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel Reading, Mark 13:24-37: **“However, in those days, after that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. ²⁵ The stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then He will send the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.**

²⁸ **“Learn this parable from the fig tree! When its branch has already become tender and puts out leaves, you know the summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things happening, you know He is near, at the doors.**

³⁰ **“Truly, I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until these things all take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words will certainly not pass away.**

³² **“No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.**

³³ **“Beware and be on the alert! For you do not know when the time will be.**

³⁴ **It is like a man who was away on a journey. When he left home, he put his slaves in charge, assigned each one his task and ordered the doorkeeper to keep watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep watch! For you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at the time when the rooster crows or early in the morning. ³⁶ Make sure that, if he comes suddenly, he does not find you asleep! ³⁷ What I tell you, I tell everyone: ‘Keep watch!’”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today, on this the Last Sunday of the Church Year, we are reminded that

Judgment Day is approaching, when we shall see the **“Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”** On that day, **“He will send the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.”** The moment God brings history to an end is the moment when the Son of Man will come in the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead.

It’s been a couple of thousand years since Jesus promised to return. Although He has made this promise, many today think it unlikely, even among Christians. Yet, our text gives a very vivid picture. Jesus promises to return in visible glory and with great power, and when He returns, all will know that Jesus of Nazareth, the One who did live two thousand years ago, the One who died on the cross, was buried and rose again. He is Lord over all, the very Son of God, the Messiah. He was made incarnate, carried out a public three-year ministry, was crucified to pay for our sin, was bodily raised from the dead, was exalted over all things, and, yes, one day will return for all to see.

In our text, Jesus puts it all into perspective. The created world is temporary. Its days, like our own, are numbered. Jesus says that **“the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light.”²⁵ The stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.**” They have served their purpose and He who has made them will shake them. But even as we look around us, we get reminders that this world is temporary. Grey hairs, weak knees, aching muscles, and bones creaking. Machines break. Toys fall apart. The computer locks up. Sometimes we wonder if we’ll ever make it through the day.

Jesus and His disciples were in Jerusalem for what would be our Lord’s last Passover. In the verses before our text, as they left the temple, the disciples were looking around, admiring its grandeur. The temple was a beautiful and magnificent architectural achievement. The Jews took great pride in it. It stood as the central place of worship for Jews to bring their sacrifices and offer prayers to God. Here God made His dwelling with His people.

Jesus took this opportunity to teach His disciples about the end times. He made the disturbing comment that in the not-too-distant future, not one of those buildings would be intact and not one of the giant stones would be on top of another. The disciples were naturally upset about that, so they asked when that

would happen. Jesus then told them about the destruction of Jerusalem, and He took this teachable moment a step further. He pointed the disciples ahead to the times that would precede the Last Day.¹

The end of the world always has a certain allure for us, and Jesus' disciples respond in a very understandable way. They want to know when all this is going to take place. That's still what seems to fascinate people most about the end times. Why is it that Judgment Day and the end of the world as we know it have always been such attention-grabbers? To the world, they represent dramatic action and a cataclysmic battle between good and evil that must be seen (and, of course, scripted into a multimillion-dollar book series or movie). To believers, Judgment Day and the end of the world are the fulfilment of the promises of God centred in Jesus, the joyful end when we finally fall into the arms of a waiting Saviour, who won the victory over sin, Satan, and death.

To both a world that thirsts to be entertained and believers who hunger to spend eternity with God, Judgment Day and the end of the world seem so far into the future and so foggy with an unclear interpretation that any little detail is as valuable as a road sign when you're lost. There are some things about Judgment Day we know. The Apostle Paul writes that when Jesus comes again, "*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed*" (1 Cor. 15:52). But there are some things about Judgment Day we don't know, especially when it will occur.

Throughout history, there have been many who have predicted when the end of the world would take place. But the fact is that no one has been correct. What does Jesus say? He tells us, "*Don't believe them*." The way He puts it is: "**No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven.**" While we don't know when the Last Day will come, Jesus does give us some insight.

We know we must always be on the alert for Jesus' return, for He continues, "**Beware and be on the alert! For you do not know when the time will be.**"³⁴ **It is like a man who was away on a journey. When he left home, he put his slaves in charge, assigned each one his task and ordered the doorkeeper to keep watch.**"

¹ Mark 13:1-13

Jesus wants us to be alert, on guard, to keep watching for Him to come at any time. Jesus underscores this with the illustration of a man who leaves home and places his slaves in charge while he's away. Jesus is the "man," the Church is the "home," and we believers are the "servants." The first point Jesus makes with this picture is that we in the Church are to "**keep watch**," as He says - *for His return at any moment*.

The first-century Christians believed Jesus would return in their lifetime. They lived in that hope and expectation. They kept waiting and watching and longing for His appearing.

The message to us today in this twenty-first century is the same as it was to those in the first century: we don't know when He will return, so we must always keep ready. Jesus says in Luke 21: "*However, be careful that your hearts do not become burdened with carousing, drunkenness and worries about this life or that day will come on you unexpectedly,* ³⁵ *like a trap!*" (34-35).

The Lord Jesus had told His followers what they could understand, and He does the same to us. For us, life is full of trouble every day simply because we are Christians. Nevertheless, we also know and believe "*the one who endures to the end will be saved*" (Matthew 24:13). We do not walk on this troubled road alone. Jesus walks with us as we watch and wait. The Holy Spirit will empower His redeemed to make a witness before those who hate and persecute them; they will be given words of proclamation for those who persecute and punish them, murder and martyr them.² We shall endure to the end because Jesus has lived, died, and risen for us.

Dear friends, are we paying attention to the signs of the last days? Are we going along with the current or fighting the good fight of faith? In our Second Reading from before, Jude directs us, "*dearly loved people, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit!* ²¹ *Keep yourselves in the love of God and wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you eternal life!*"

Christ is coming! And when He does, we shall see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. In the end, it's all about Christ, who is the Alpha and Omega (the Beginning and the End). For "*No eye has seen, no ear has*

² Luke 12:12

heard, and no mind has comprehended what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

For those in faith, we who trust in Jesus Christ alone, this is not terrifying but wonderfully assuring. We await His coming with joy - for, as He assures us, He is coming with life, with light, forgiveness and hope, and He comes to put sin and death in their eternal places, once and for all.

So, we are built up and assured by His words. We stay ready for the Day of the Lord by undergirding our lives with those words of the Lord. The Lord Jesus has daily comfort, daily promises, daily gifts and blessings to pour into our lives as He cares for us with His Word and Sacraments and calls us to new and glorious lives with Him. **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words will certainly not pass away.”**

The Word of the Lord endures forever so that we may endure until the end. So, put on the armour of God.³ As we have been forgiven, so forgive. As we are loved by God, so share that love with others. As He serves and cares for us, so serve and care for others. As we have received the Good News of salvation in Christ, so we share it with others that they, too, may know Him and be with their Saviour in the mansions He has prepared in heaven. As we are comforted, we bestow that comfort. We live out our lives as believers who already belong to eternal life. As Jesus prayed in His high-priestly prayer to the Father, *“This is eternal life, to know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent”* (John 17:3).

The Day of the Lord is coming. The signs are all around us. We’re living in the last days. It won’t be easy for us as believers. Yet, we are not afraid. Christ will soon come again in righteous judgment to take us and all believers in Him to be with Him at His side. Until then, He’s at our side. His coming may be sudden, but its certainty calls us to a life of joyful expectation. Be assured by His coming! Live as believers who long for the day of His appearing. Pray that day will be here sooner rather than later, the day when there will be no more headaches and heartaches, fears and tears, troubles or trials, strife and sorrow, just God’s grace in fullest measure, eternal life. The Lord’s desire for us is that His return would

³ Ephesians 6:11

not be a day of terror but triumph in Him.

The One who is coming has come so that we might live. The Babe of Bethlehem became the Good Friday Saviour and the Easter hope for the whole world. As Christians, we live in Him now by faith, and on that Last Day, we shall be with Him forever in love! That's good news for us and for all who believe. With faith in Christ, there is forgiveness for all of our sins. There is hope when things seem hopeless. There is life after death. There is eternity. With Jesus, we are more than conquerors. That's why Jesus has lived, died, and risen for us. We stay alert, for He is coming again.

“To Him who can keep you from falling and to make you stand without fault and with great joy in His glorious presence, ²⁵to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all ages and now and for ever and ever! Amen.” (Jude 24-25).

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE LAST SUNDAY OF THE CHURCH YEAR

Heavenly Father, we love and praise You because You have saved us and called us to be Your own people, not because of what we are or have done, but because of Your mercy and grace. In Jesus Christ You planned our salvation before the beginning of time, and revealed it to us in His first coming. We praise You for all Your daily goodness, but especially for giving Jesus for us to suffer, die, and rise again, destroying death and giving us eternal life.

Grant us Your grace that we may remain to the end in the saving truth of Your Word, produce the fruits of faith, hope, and love, and finally receive the crown of righteousness on that great day when Jesus comes again. Continue to protect us from all the errors, lies, false security, and empty wisdom of this world. Strengthen us to live in peace and holiness with all people, to endure humbly whatever we have to face because we are Your children, and to pray fervently in every time of temptation. Make us aware of the signs of the last times, and help us to focus our eyes on the home above that will one day be ours.

Make Your Church strong, O Father. Give it power to fight the good fight of faith with eager determination. Give us faithful pastors who know Christ, and whom Christ will know on His return. Grant that our young people may be

equipped to serve You and their fellowmen in every useful and honourable career. Bless all people who serve the needy. Graciously enable all parents to teach their children the way of life in Christ Jesus, that the young may remain faithful to their Lord to the end.

Rule and direct the nations of the earth that they may turn from darkness to Your light. Protect and defend our own land. Lead those who are guilty of wickedness, immorality, and materialism to repent. Put down all evil in our society and let Your Word triumph, that truth and godliness may hold sway.

Hear the cries of the needy, and come to their aid. Strengthen the weak, comfort the depressed, and heal the sick. Help them to accept their situation with trust in Your love, and build up their joy and hope. Keep us all strong in faith, that we may look with joy for the return of our Lord. To Him, with You and the Holy Spirit, be honour, glory, and power for ever. Amen.

The Last Sunday of the Church Year

Isaiah 51:4-6

⁴ “Pay attention to Me, My people! Listen to Me, My nation! For Teaching will go out from Me, and I shall establish My justice in an instant as a light for the peoples.

⁵ My righteousness is near. My salvation will go out, and My arms will bring justice to the peoples. The coastlands will put their hope in Me and wait eagerly for My arm.

⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look at the earth beneath! For the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who dwell in it will die like gnats. However, My

salvation will last for ever, and My righteousness will not be frustrated.

Jude 20-25

²⁰ You, however, dearly loved people, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit! ²¹ Keep yourselves in the love of God and wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you eternal life! ²² Some people have doubts. Show mercy on them! ²³ Save others “by snatching them out of the fire”! Show mercy to still others, with fear, detesting even the garment stained by the flesh!

²⁴ Furthermore, to Him who can keep you from falling and to make you stand without fault and with

great joy in His glorious presence,
²⁵ to the only God, our Saviour,
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