

“And How!” (Mark 13:37)

Advent 1, November 30, 2008

A few years ago, my aunt and uncle decided to downsize and move into a new seniors' development. It was a beautiful place. The condos, the golf course, the other amenities – all the very best. One thing seemed a little weird, though, and that was the name: *Eschaton*. I don't know what the developers had in mind, but in theology this little Greek word means *the end times*, as in the end of the world! Study of the end times is called *eschatology*. The tribulation, Jesus' second coming, the Day of Judgment – that's the *Eschaton*. So you see what I mean. Kind of a weird name for a seniors' development. Of course, I kept this to myself. I didn't have the heart to tell my aunt she was living in the “end times.” But then again, knowing her, she might have just laughed and said, “Aren't we all!”

And she would have been right, wouldn't she? In the truest sense, we are all living in the end times, whether you mean the “official” end times before Jesus comes again, or our personal end times before we go to meet our Maker. We are all living in the “end times.” And we need to be ready for the end *whenever* – the 18-year old just as much as the 80-year old. For as Jesus makes clear in our text, we can never know just when exactly the end will come.

Now, every year this is the message on the first Sunday of Advent: our need to be ready for the end whenever it may come. The key word is *watch*, and it is accompanied by a lot of synonyms: “**Beware, be alert...keep awake.**” But the question is: How are we to apply this message to our lives? How *specifically*? And that's always the question, isn't it? My old landlady, Catherine, use to say, “You preachers are great at explaining the what, where, when, and why, but what we really want to hear is how – how to do what God is telling us to do.” And I suspect that's especially true with this call to *watch*. Back when I started out in the ministry, there was a lot of interest in watching for signs of the end times. Some of you may remember authors like Hal Lindsey and books like *The Late, Great Planet Earth*; people trying to decode Daniel and Revelations; figuring out who's the Beast and what's the meaning of 666. Fortunately, that fad has subsided. It seems pretty clear we're not to *watch* in that sense. But Jesus' Word remains. His call to *watch* remains. So how *are* we to do that?

An episode from colonial times points us in the right direction. At noon on May 19, 1780, the skies turned so dark that the sun could hardly be seen. Many feared it was the Day of Judgment. In the Connecticut House of Representatives, some were so shaken they were on their knees begging for God's mercy. There were also calls for immediate adjournment. But the Speaker of the House would have none of it. He stood up before them and said, “*The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty.*”

Bull's-eye! Jesus' own words make it clear that He doesn't want us to watch for the end *itself*. That's about as useful as watching for a pot of water to boil!

Rather, He wants us to watch ourselves until the end. This is a call to faithfulness. It is a call to obedient perseverance. It is a call to live each day as if it could be our last. Or more to the point, it is a call to live each day following Jesus. If we're keeping our eyes focused on Jesus *now*, if we are trusting, obeying, and serving Jesus *now*, there's no need to be afraid of facing Jesus whenever the end may come. The only thing to fear is drifting off or drifting away. That is what we are to watch against – and is why Jesus tells us, **“Beware, be alert...keep awake.”**

But here again, there's that nagging little question: *How? How do we avoid drifting? How do we watch against it? How?* You'll be pleased to know that Scripture does give us an answer – several answers, in fact. It takes some research to find them. But hey, what's a pastor for? What I found is that every other place in Scripture where this word **“watch”** occurs, it is attached to something that will help us do it. In one place, for instance, we're told to **“watch and pray...”** In another place, **“Watch and be sober...”** In another, **“Watch and remember [what you've been taught]...”** Paul tells us, **“Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.”** Finally, in Revelations we're told, **“Watch and strengthen whatever is on the verge of dying...”** Now, these are pretty clear instructions. Pretty practical, too. And as we take a closer look at them, we'll find they're pretty much what Advent is all about!

For instance, **“Watch and pray.”** While the rest of the world may spend this season rushing about even more than usual, in the church Advent is meant to be a quiet time to focus all the more on God. One tradition that helps us do this is daily devotions around the **Advent wreath**. We light a candle; read a Scripture, reflecting on God's love, His gift of a Savior; then we spend time in prayer. Now, I would hope that we all take time for daily prayer anyway. Without prayer, we're sitting ducks for the kind of drift we're to watch against. I mean, how do we stay close to God if we're not even talking to Him? But during Advent, it's especially important to spend some time each day in prayer. This is a busy time, a stressful time, an emotional time, and for some, a depressing time. So many distractions pull our focus away from what's most important; away from trusting, obeying, and serving God above all else. Prayer is a valuable defense. It helps keep us centered, focused, tuned in to God. When we remember that Jesus originally said, **“Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation,”** it just makes that much more sense that if we're serious about following Jesus, serious about not drifting away, serious about countering the tensions of the holiday season, we need to be serious about taking time for prayer. And daily devotions around the Advent wreath is a great way to get serious. **“Watch and pray.”**

Speaking of serious, Scripture also tells us to **“watch and be sober...”** In this case, it doesn't mean sober in the teetotaler sense – though that's also a good thing to watch during the holiday season! – but rather, sober in the sense of **serious**. We want to make sure we're taking the Lord seriously, taking His will seriously – and really, treating life seriously. That requires some looking inward.

Now, many of us take time to look inward during Lent. It's kind of a spiritual Spring Cleaning, if you will. But originally, it was also done during Advent. And when you think about it, what better time is there to look at our lives and make sure we're spiritually on track? Part of what makes this season so hectic is the conflicting demands that can pull us off-track. *We should be doing this! We ought to be doing that! We have to do such and such, then such and such, then such and such!* And what happens to us? When Christmas comes, we can be totally drained! Our bank accounts, too! And for what? When we run down the list of "have-to's," how many of them really matter that much? And how many of them matter as much as we let them? Decorating, shopping, baking, visiting, sending out cards, attending different functions – is that really what life is about? Or Christmas? If it's fun, fine – within limits; but if it's overwhelming, that's a different story! Especially if it pulls us away from what *does* matter, what life *is* all about! Then we need to put on the brakes. Deliberately! For we all know what will happen if we don't do it deliberately. Like it or not, we'll just fall back into the same old trap of hectic holiday "have-to's." So Advent *is* just the right time to take a look at our lives – what's driving us, what's controlling us, what's going on inside us. And, if necessary, it's a good time to kick some habits; a good time to "sober up" spiritually-speaking in the sense of "**watch and be sober...**"

We can do this as part of our daily devotions, too – while spending time in the Word. Now, whenever we spend time in the Word, the goal is to hear what God wants to say to us, so we always want to do more than just read it or even just study it – especially in our devotional time. We want to mull over the Word, reflect on it, and prayerfully apply it to ourselves: *Lord, what is it You want to say to me?* During Advent, we might spend some time reflecting on the Ten Commandments. *Lord, am I drifting here or there?* If guilt is a big driver, we might spend some time reflecting on Gospel-oriented passages like Ephesians 2 ("**By grace you have been saved through faith**") or Romans 8 ("**There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**"). Either way, it always helps to get back to basics – as Scripture says, to "**watch and remember [what we've been taught].**" So, what if we find that we *have* drifted? What better time to get back on track, in the sense of "**watch and strengthen whatever is on the verge of dying**"? Or what if we find that we're doing "okay" but feel pulled in directions we don't like? This Advent reflection can help us put on the brakes, *not* let ourselves get pulled there – in short, help us "**be watchful, stand firm in our faith, be courageous, be strong.**" Always the goal is to make sure we're taking the Lord seriously, taking His will seriously, and treating life seriously. That's what it means to "**watch and be sober.**" Spending quality time with God each day can help us do that. Prayer *and* reflection on the Word will help us stay close *to* God and keep us *from* drifting.

So...Jesus says, "**Watch!**" We ask "How?" Scripture answers with clear instructions: "**Watch and pray,**" "**watch and be sober,**" "**watch and remember [what you've been taught];**" "**be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong;**" "**watch and strengthen whatever is on the**

verge of dying...” Yes, now at the beginning of Advent, Jesus says **“Watch!”** And as we have seen, these scriptural “how-to’s” are part and parcel of observing a true Advent, especially our daily devotions around the Advent wreath. That isn’t just a tradition. It’s really an opportunity to make an otherwise hectic time a time of peace and inward preparation.

You know, two years ago I got a taste of what Advent must have been like before things got so hectic and commercialized. I spent December in the German village of Deichhausen at the bakery of my cousin, Heinz. There, Advent is still Advent. Christmas has to wait until Christmas. And what a difference it makes! Mind you, there are fun things for Advent, too. In the bakery, certain cookies are baked for each particular week. On St. Nicholas Day, the children dress up and go house to house asking for sweets. There is also the living Advent Calendar – each night a different family hosts Advent devotions at their home, then afterward serves coffee and *kuchen*. Yes, there are fun things in Advent, too. But...each night I would take the dog for a walk through the village, and it was so peaceful! Few lights, few decorations, no Christmas trees, but in most homes an Advent Wreath – just a different approach to the season. It was nice to have a calm, quiet setting to prepare inwardly for Christmas. When I got back here I felt ready to celebrate.

And you know what? I really liked that – so much that I’m not willing to give it up! What’s more, I don’t think any of us should have to. Advent can be a time of peace and inward preparation, and there’s no need to go abroad or turn back the clock. It’s a matter of carving out the time each day for prayer and reflection. I’ll do that with daily devotions around the Advent Wreath. I’d encourage each of you to do the same. I think you’ll find this tradition very enriching. But with or without an Advent Wreath, do take some time each day just for God and yourself. Before diving into Christmas, prepare yourself by taking some time each day to watch and pray and reflect. Amen.