

**Scripture Reading**  
**Isaiah 64:1-9**

- <sup>1</sup> <sup>[a]</sup> Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains would tremble before you!
- <sup>2</sup> As when fire sets twigs ablaze  
and causes water to boil,  
come down to make your name known to your enemies  
and cause the nations to quake before you!
- <sup>3</sup> For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,  
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
- <sup>4</sup> Since ancient times no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
- <sup>5</sup> You come to the help of those who gladly do right,  
who remember your ways.  
But when we continued to sin against them,  
you were angry.  
How then can we be saved?
- <sup>6</sup> All of us have become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;  
we all shrivel up like a leaf,  
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
- <sup>7</sup> No one calls on your name  
or strives to lay hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us  
and have given us over to <sup>[b]</sup> our sins.
- <sup>8</sup> Yet you, LORD, are our Father.  
We are the clay, you are the potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.
- <sup>9</sup> Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD;  
do not remember our sins forever.

Footnotes:

- a. Isaiah 64:1 In Hebrew texts 64:1 is numbered 63:19b, and 64:2-12 is numbered 64:1-11.
- b. Isaiah 64:7 Septuagint, Syriac and Targum; Hebrew *have made us melt because of*

**Message**  
**Mark 13:24-37 - “Scrutinize”**

Today, on this first Sunday in Advent, we are reminded of the “balancing act” Christians are called to live; a “balancing act” between living in the here and now, while also keeping watch for our Lord’s return. For while God’s Word calls us to live our lives on a day-by-day basis recognizing each moment or event as an opportunity to live for Christ in this world, we also know that God’s Word calls us to be an expectant people; people who scrutinize the times and keep watch for God’s activities.

Like the Jews of Jesus’ day who lived in expectation of the coming Messiah, today we wait for Jesus to interrupt the “ordinary”, the “routine”, the “usual”, to fulfill His promise of returning in glory.

We do this because it is our commission; a directive from Jesus for us to keep watch.

Jesus’ commission for us to “keep watch” is such an important instruction that it is the Gospel message for the first Sunday in a new Church year.

But there is a problem if we do not understand what Jesus meant by keeping “watch”. So today we’re going to carefully examine our Lord’s words, words offered as Jesus and his disciples sat on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple in Jerusalem. The context of Jesus’ words are important, so let me emphasize that prior to that moment on the Mount of Olives, the apostles Peter, James and John had privately asked Jesus to tell them what would be the sign that His recent prophecies of the Temple’s destruction would be fulfilled.

Jesus began His response to Peter, James & John with a warning, describing deceivers who would come in His name. He goes on to talk about wars and rumors of wars. He speaks about Christian persecution and family betrayal, and about the need for people to escape Jerusalem. Jesus spoke of a time when faithful Jews would have to run for their lives abandoning their magnificent Temple which stood at the center of their religious life so not to be destroyed along with it. And then, once again, Jesus warned of more false Messiah's offering an artificial hope through miracles they could perform.

Jesus ends this description by saying "So be on your guard: I have told you everything ahead of time." And that is where this morning's Gospel text enters:

#### **Mark 13:24-37**

<sup>24</sup> *"But in those days, following that distress,  
"the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
<sup>25</sup> the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."<sup>[a]</sup>*

<sup>26</sup> *"At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with  
great power and glory.<sup>27</sup> And he will send his angels and gather his elect  
from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.*

<sup>28</sup> *"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender  
and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.<sup>29</sup> Even so, when  
you see these things happening, you know that it<sup>[b]</sup> is near, right at the  
door.<sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all  
these things have happened.<sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my  
words will never pass away.*

<sup>32</sup> *“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Be on guard! Be alert<sup>[c]</sup>! You do not know when that time will come. <sup>34</sup> It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.*

<sup>35</sup> *“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. <sup>36</sup> If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. <sup>37</sup> What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”*

Footnotes:

a. Mark 13:25 Isaiah 13:10; 34:4

b. Mark 13:29 Or *he*

c. Mark 13:33 Some manuscripts *alert and pray*

I’m wondering this morning, if you, like Peter, James & John, might be a bit disappointed with Jesus’ response. “What will be the sign..”, they asked, but Jesus answered; ...this is how you will know that the time is near. The apostles were looking for precision; a specific date, but Jesus offered something more valuable when He charged them to keep WATCH; amid our day by day living we are called by Jesus to *scrutinize*; to closely and carefully note God activity among us.

To grasp what Jesus is really offering we need to learn the Greek word *blepo* which we translate as “watch”. We need to understand that Jesus was not calling His disciples to keep watch for a specific event. Rather, ***blepo* refers to a discernment concerning realities which lie beyond the observations of the physical senses.**

Jesus is calling His followers to perceive the reality of His imminent return when they notice earthly events unfolding; things we see happening

even in our day. Jesus wanted his disciples to note but not focus on the earthly events but on God's promises and His return.

Now why did Jesus do this? Why didn't He just given Peter, James and John what they asked for; the "exactly what's going to happen before the end" answer?

Well as we already read, the quick answer is that Jesus did not know when. No one other than the Father knew the exact time. Not even the Holy Spirit in you can tell you or anyone else that.. though many people have claimed to know "the year, the month, he date.. the time. When proven wrong with the passage of that hour, suddenly there is some excuse. **NO ONE KNOWS EXCEPT THE FATHER.**

Don't waste your time trying to figure it out. However, do what Jesus says; **WATCH**. Focus upon His imminent return as you note earthly events unfolding.

**Today I offer three reasons to WATCH for Jesus' return.**

**1. We watch to avoid becoming lost amid the distracted of this world.**

Whether we find ourselves at work, in school, in our home or even at Church, we are bombarded by distractions. When was the last time you sat down to read, or to talk with a friend, or even just drove your car without being distracted by a phone call or a text message? We are losing the ability to keep our focus. When Jesus tells us to watch, he knows just how easily we become distracted from that which is most important. He knows how many times you have set aside a specific time to pray and read His

Word, and how many times you have allowed life to distract you from that opportunity.

When we fail to WATCH as Jesus charges us to watch, we also fail to perceive the importance of prioritizing God every day.

And it is not just the world which distracts us. It is sad to say but distractions occur in the Church as well, and they can easily take a watchful Christian and turn him or her into an individual distracted by their religion.

Just last week I found myself in conversation with a friend of our congregation about a question she had been asked. “Are you religious?” someone asked her. This friend asked me, “Now how do you answer that?”; which lead us into a discussion about “religion” being defined these days as something institutional, while a term like “spiritual” being more in line with a life-giving connection with God.

This morning we must not miss a not-so-subtle message in Mark 13, as Jesus refers to the need for Jews to flee the temple, so not to be destroyed with it. For the Jews of Jesus time, their religious life revolved around the very existence of the Temple. While in earlier times Jews learned to worship God while wandering in the wilderness, the Temple soon became the very center of their religion. In today’s language, their spiritual life had morphed into religious life. Theirs had been the kind of worship pleasing to God, as Jesus would teach us through his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well:

***John 4:21b, 23b***

*<sup>21</sup> .... a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. .... <sup>23</sup> .....true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.*

How often have traditions of our religion; the buildings in which we worship, the fixtures in a sanctuary, the times & forms of our services, or the special events of church life, blinded us from seeing God's activity?

What must we learn about the foundation of our religion, as we hear Jesus' teach "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mark 13:31)?

Jesus implores us to WATCH, to look beyond the distractions of this world, including the distractions of religion, so that we can discern God's activities.

Secondly,

**2. As we keep watch for what God is doing, we can better deal with the sufferings we experience.**

In Mark 13 we find Jesus being very upfront with His disciples about the difficulties, even the suffering they and we will experience before His return. Earthquakes, wars, famine, floggings, trials, betrayals, even the loss of home. There is no "health & wealth theology" presented here. There is no candy-coating to make our rotting world more palatable, but there is Jesus' encouragement to watch.

Why? Because while these unpleasant things will happen and become an overwhelming focus of most people, for us these same things can serve to remind us that Christ's return is near. And because we watch and scrutinize, hope in God replaces the hopelessness of sinful humanity. The end is coming soon, so hang in there, scrutinize these events carefully; discern God's salvation amid the destruction of everything that is worldly.

With eyes set on God's salvation; the return of Christ in glory, and a new heaven and earth, we will be able to face the temporary day-by-day difficulties and sufferings. Like a child who is promised a cookie after they swallow that nasty-tasting medicine; or like the hope of returning to health if one endures surgery and painful rehabilitation, we can all relate to why Jesus wants us to keep our eyes on the promises of God amid the day-by-day trials we face.

And remember, while earthly promises and hope are spotty at best, God is faithful to all his promises. We affirm with the Apostle Paul that

**2 Corinthians 1:20**

*...no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.*

If God promises,,, you can "take it to the bank".

As we WATCH for God's activity amid whatever earthly sufferings we must endure, we will find courage and hope because suffering reminds us that Christ's return is near.

Finally,

**3. We watch for Jesus because He wants us to be ready for Him.**

One of the most challenging obstacles for Christians awaiting Jesus' return is that we have been waiting for nearly 2,000 years. The early Christians thought Jesus would return before any of them experienced death. The Apostle Paul addressed some disillusionment among the Thessalonians when a few Christians began dying. Later, the Apostle Peter offered Christians an important perspective in his second letter when he wrote:

## **2 Peter 3:8-10a**

*.... do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.*

Peter's words reflect the teaching he had heard from the Lord Jesus, our same Lord who describes that His reappearance will be sudden, coming in the clouds with great power and glory.

With our eyes set to the skies we will not be led away from the faith by false Messiahs, whether they are Sun Yon Moon or the recent White House shooter who declared himself to be the returned Jesus.

Jesus' descriptions offered to Peter, James & John and passed down to us in the Bible are certainly enough to keep us ready for His return.

Six years and eleven months ago (Dec. 26, 2004) an earthquake and resulting tsunami in the Indian Ocean killed over 230,000 people in fourteen countries, flooding coastal communities with waves up to 100-feet high. It was one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. This disaster, together with a 2005 Tsunami, woke up our world to a need for warning systems in tsunami-prone areas of the world.

But amid this "technological" salvation plan I found it significant that amid the horror of the 2004 Tsunami, 181 fishermen living on the beach in Thailand, all escaped death.

How?

These fisherman known as Morgan Sea Gypsies had survived because they had heeded wisdom passed down by their elders, a warning to keep watch.

*The tribe's 65-year-old village chief Sarmao Kathalay says, "The elders told us that if the water recedes fast it will reappear in the same quantity in which it disappeared."*

*...in the hours before the killer Tsunami crashed ashore, the Morgan sea gypsies were living on those beaches. They were in harm's way (when) the sea drained quickly from the beach, leaving stranded fish flopping on the shore. How easy it would have been for those who live off of the sea to run down where the water had been minutes ago and fill every basket available with fish. Some people did just that in other areas of South Thailand. Not the Morgan sea gypsies. When the water receded from the beach, the tribal chief ordered every one of the 181 tribal members to run to a temple in the mountains of South Surin Island. When the waters crashed ashore, the 181 sea gypsies were safe on high ground.*

Craig Brian Larson, Arlington Heights, Illinois; source: "How 'Sea Gypsies' Survived the Tsunami," Associated Press, as seen in | posted 1/10/2005

And they were safe not because of technology, but because they remembered and heeded wisdom passed down generation after generation to keep watch... to scrutinize the meaning of receding seas; and what was unseen but certain to come. They kept watch, obeyed and were saved.

Jesus wants us to watch because He wants us to be ready to receive His salvation.

As we “watch” for the return of our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ and the joy we will share because we are ready, we WATCH with an intensity that allows the chaos of this world and the burdens we endure as Christians to serve only as reminders of God’s promises and His imminent return.

So, this month, and in the year ahead:

- Amid the chaos of Black Friday and Cyber Monday... watch for Jesus.
- Amid the financial struggles of recession, watch for Jesus.
- Amid the frustration of youth and the realities of aging watch for Jesus.

For as certain as Jesus came as a baby born in Bethlehem, Jesus will come again, suddenly and in great power and glory, and he will send His angels to gather his elect. This is a promise from God our Savior in which we find our hope.

As we begin a new church year together, let us keep watch for God’s presence and salvation! AMEN