

**“Stay Alert!”**

**SUMC, Salado, Tx 76571**

**Preaching Text: Mark 13:5-8, 28-37**

**30 August 2020—13th Sunday after Pentecost**

+++++

**“Bad times wake us up to the good times we weren’t paying attention to”**

**(—Matt Damon, in the film “Good Will Hunting”).**

+++++

Occasionally, we all hear some well-intentioned person say, “it does not matter what one believes as long as s/he are sincere.” This sentiment is about as untrue as anything we will ever hear. The horrific day of 9/11—nearly twenty years ago—should put this simple-minded platitude to rest. What we think and believe does matter! It matters and for this reason: theology (God-talk) is of utmost value.

Our lesson today begins with Jesus’ sage advice: “Watch out that no one deceives you.” Jesus’ caution concerns the notion of *Yom Yahweh* or “the Day of the Lord.” The Hebrew prophets employed this term to call Israel back from apostasy and betrayal (see: Amos 5:18, 20; Zephaniah 1:7; Malachi 4:5). The Day of the Lord pertains to the end times. Some call it “judgment day.”

Many biblical experts label Mark 13 as a “Little Apocalypse.” The literary form is apocalyptic; the content is eschatological. Apocalyptic is a literary genre fixing on the doctrine of the last things. Other biblical literary genres, among many, are parable, psalm, genealogy, Gospel, poetry, and epistle. The apocalyptic genre focuses on the doctrine of the last things. This doctrine of the last things we call “eschatology.” This word eschatology is a set of precepts that comprise the content of apocalyptic and suggests that God will complete God’s work at creation.

Thus, apocalyptic works for example are Mark 13, Daniel, and Revelation and are typical apocalyptic writings. Generally, apocalyptic literature divides people into two groups: God’s people and the enemies of God’s people. So, the message for the enemies of the people of God is a word of horror. Yet, this same apocalyptic word comforts and encourages God’s people. When Hebrew prophets wanted to get the people’s attention, they often reminded the hearers of the power of God’s wrath. We hear the same today.

A church member asked me to attend her brother’s funeral to sustain and support her. She told me, “They don’t believe as I believe.” We reached a country church outside of Hooks, Texas, and I met the pastor—a “firebrand preacher.” He had acquired a rather rigid apocalyptic vision. His sermon texts were invariably from Joel, Ezekiel, Mark 13,

Daniel, and, certainly, Revelation. The more incensed he got while preaching, the closer to God's truth he believed he stood. I did not expect a fine afternoon. The two-and-a-half-hour funeral lived down to my expectations.

The preacher yelled, screamed, shouted, cried, and took all attenders to task that hot, August afternoon. They had the deceased laid out in front of the pulpit. The preacher reminded us that it was too late for Joe. He could only get to heaven if God made a rare exemption. Yet, it surely wasn't too late for us. We just needed to repent, "live by the book," and get right with God—now! He preached like this for two-hours.

Afterwards, I never wanted that experience again and loathed that cheerless afternoon. The preacher assaulted every theological certainty I abide. My older church member's comments driving home after the service surprised me. She said, "I guess you now know why I wanted you to go with me." I replied that I certainly did. Then she said, "I disliked all that preacher said. More than that I despised the way he said it. But you know, I can't honestly say that he said anything that wasn't true. He was right about my brother. I guess there were many people there who needed a good dose of truth."

I was not brave enough to share with her how God moves me because my God loves creation. God loves it to the extent that God sent Jesus—the Jesus who saves us in grace and mercy. But now as I think back on that day, perhaps that preacher had lived long enough to see that people without God are indeed a hopeless people. Every now and then, perhaps we need a "whack on the side of the head" or a "kick in the seat of the pants" to get our attention. Perhaps.

The "getting our attention" business begins at Mark 13:32-37. We now circle back to Peter, James, John, and Andrew, the four disciples' who earlier asked: "when will these things happen? What sign will show that all these things are about to come to an end" (13:3)! This is the question to which our whole lesson's text is an answer. Jesus clearly intimates the end will come. There is no doubt about the end happening. Jesus even guarantees this cosmic event by saying, "they will see the Human One/Son of Man (NRSV) coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven" (13:26-27). However, no doubt to the disciple's consternation, Jesus is spare on the operational details.

Although, Jesus frustrates them with no juicy specifics, he does tell them that "nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows." In a like way, we are as amazed here as we were when James and John ask for a special favor—kind of "a disciple upgrade." As you recall,

Mark's Jesus surprises us when he tells the two brothers: "to sit at my right or left hand isn't mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared" (10:40). Thus, in a purposeful fashion, Mark subordinates Jesus to God here—perhaps as it plainly should be. Certainly, in the history of theology and interpretation, Mark's portrayal of Jesus not knowing some things opened the door for various factions of the faithful to embrace a dogma that Jesus was not divine. Jesus was merely human. Arianism advanced this heresy. In fact, this heretical dogma prompted ample turmoil in the early church. The church declared Arianism heretical at the 1st Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. This subsequent controversy in the church was not Mark's problem. Rather, Mark wanted to tarnish the status of those false messiahs who came in Jesus' name and in Jesus' time.

Because time is of the essence, Jesus tells these disciples to "Stay alert" (Matthew 24:43; 25:13; 26:38; Mark 14:34; 1 Peter 5:8). It is such a vital part of Jesus' message that this phrase, "Stay alert!" Mark uses four times in chapter 13 alone (13:33, 34, 35, 37). It means fundamentally to be attentive or "look alive." Perhaps we could say that "repetition is the key to knowledge." Why the repetition? A look at the next chapter, Mark 14:37-38, clarifies the return of the warning to stay alert: Jesus "came and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Couldn't you stay alert for one hour?'" The implicit reply is a definite "no."

The response as to why Mark's Jesus keeps drawing on this caution to stay alert is because "no one knows the time." Be on guard, in other words. Then Jesus tells a parable blending elements from two other synoptic Gospels (see: Matthew 25:14ff. and Luke 12:35ff.). As we know, Jesus will soon depart from the disciple's physical presence. Yet, Jesus charge to them is to keep the faith. Also, they need to play the part of devoted servants who do their work in the master's absence. When the master returns, whether soon or late, Jesus' charge to the twelve is to be those who do their duty to the vow and promise they have made to be servants of Jesus—their master.

When at the end of our text, Jesus says: "What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert," we might sensibly suggest that Mark shifts his target audience. Ever since the opening of chapter 13, Mark's Jesus talks to Peter, James, John, and Andrew. Now it seems as if Mark shifts the audience to whom he writes. It is as if Mark writes directly to the reader: "I say to all."

I propose that the end of an event gives meaning to all that comes before it. For example, in any specified pursuit, it is the end which determines all that comes before it. When people begin casual dating, it is a completely different past-time, then when daters begin to look for a lifelong marriage partner. Likewise, semester exams for

graduate students take a more earnest tone or tenor, than do pop quizzes for high school students. The end, again, determines all that comes before it.

So, what does Jesus say to us today? I say he says: "Stay alert."