

Prepare and Watch for His Coming

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Well...Happy New Year! Today begins the season of Advent and the new liturgical calendar year. We're going to focus on the Gospel of Mark, as we prepare for the coming of Christ. And while it's still not quite December, we've already begun to prepare. Our Sanctuary is decorated to celebrate His first coming at Christmas. But what about His second coming? Jesus tells us this morning that ***"...concerning that day or that hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."*** (v.32) So, what should we do? Prepare and be ready for His coming!

Over the course of this past year, preparation is something that we've gotten used to doing more and more. In addition to the preparation we normally do, to get ready for things like inclement weather, work, and school. This year, we've had to prepare even more. For instance, if you want to go to the store, you need to be prepared by wearing a mask. You need to have two weeks of supplies, just in case you need to be quarantined at home. And even though vaccines are on their way to being approved – all of us need to be prepared for even more restrictions should the expected rise in the number of COVID-19 cases continue to increase.

And so, caught up with all the warnings that we've had because of the pandemic, our national elections, and the growing concerns over the economy, many Christians just haven't been preparing for Christ's coming like they would under normal circumstances. It's been more like the time when kids went to school and their classroom teacher would say something like, *"Now class, I'm going down the hall to the office. While I'm gone, I am going to trust each one of you to act like ladies and gentlemen. Each of you has your work to do – I am going now, and I'll be right back."*

Now if you've ever been in that situation as a student, I'm sure you remember what happens next. Because if the whole class was being tested, it surely didn't do well, because all heck would break loose. And while some kids might've tried to do their work, others made paper airplanes, missiles, or spitballs. Still, others started talking, walking around – in and between desks – making fun and teasing one another. And yet, if the class were a little more organized – one or two kids would stand near the door, listening for the teacher to return, while the others would write notes on the board, or simply goof off.

It seems like we're all living at the time when the teacher is away – living between the times between Christ's first coming – as a baby in the manger and His second coming as Lord and Judge of all. And while there are some of us who are looking out for the return of the teacher, some are doing things as if God didn't exist at all. Wandering around, not paying attention, looking out for themselves, or causing trouble with their neighbor. Certainly not being faithful in their witness by attending to the work that God has given each of us to do while

He's away and not returning back to God, some of what He first gave to us – our time, our talent, and our treasure.

The season of Advent is a wake-up call for all of us to prepare for His coming and to watch for His return. We've had a glimpse of just how chaotic our world can be without Him. And while it might seem to satisfy our sinful nature for a time, we also know the pain associated with the consequences of our sinfulness. The loneliness and isolation that comes when darkness descends on us. As well as our great need to hear the Good News of His forgiveness and our need for His return in our lives once again.

Jesus says today that we need to stay awake and be ready for His return. And while there still might be time for us to prepare, as we say/said in the Apostles Creed, He will come to judge both the living and the dead. We need to turn from our sinful ways, and because of His life, death, and resurrection, receive the forgiveness and life that He provides. His ongoing ministry of the Gospel enriches our understanding and sustains us. He sends His disciples to call us to Himself in the fellowship of His church so that having been prepared by His Word in hearts and minds, we might also encourage others as well. It's not a matter of IF, but a matter of WHEN He'll return. And even though He tells us that heaven and earth will pass away, He also shares with us that His words will stand forever.

Now is the time to prepare so that we can all look forward to His return! It's because of His grace and mercy that we've been called to be part of this ministry. Being part of this ministry we gather together – either in-person or online - to hear His Word. And as individuals, we also take the time to read His Word and

study it so that we might be enriched by Him in all speech and all knowledge. We enter into this fellowship of believers - called the church - by means of His Grace through the washing of simple water and the Word. And He strengthens and sustains our faith, also by means of His Grace, when we receive His very body and blood – in, with and under the bread and the wine.

You know there's a story of Sir Ernest Shackleton, who was a British explorer in the early 1900s who left a few of his men on Elephant Island while on a South Pole expedition. He promised them that he would return, but when he tried to go back, massive icebergs blocked his return. But then, as if by a miracle, the ice opened up, providing for a way to get through. His men, ready and waiting, quickly got aboard his ship. No sooner than they had left the island than the massive formations of ice came crashing down behind them. After reflecting on their narrow escape, Sir Shackleton said to his men, *"It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go!"* To which one of them replied, *"We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'He may come today.'"*

While no one knows the day or the hour that our Lord Jesus will return, as we begin the season of Advent and enter into a new liturgical year, not only do we prepare and look forward to celebrating His first coming, but we also continue to prepare and look forward to His return. Because He comes to bring us life and Salvation. And it's by His Grace that we're able to live with Him, both now and always.

In Jesus' name, Amen.