

Mark 13:24-37

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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Living in the House until the End

The Word of the Lord from Mark 13:31: Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Perhaps I spoke too soon. We worked our way through the first part of Mark 13 last week, which was largely driven by the disciples asking Jesus for a sign that the end of the world is about to take place. If you recall, I said that Jesus didn't answer their question; but instead, He went on to talk about what they could expect until the end, things like wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecution and the like.

But did I speak too soon? We move on in Mark and hear Jesus say this: "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers of heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." So Jesus does say what will happen at the end.

Here's the important thing, though: these signs in the heavens do not signal that the end is about to take place. Rather, this is how the end happens. It's not like the troubles of the world subside into an unnatural calm, and then the stars begin to go out over a period of time as the sun loses a few watts per day. This happens all at once. Picture it this way: imagine that you're outside on a clear night, staring at the stars and wondering at the vast three dimensions of space and how the Lord has created stars that are trillions of miles away for your enjoyment and His glory. Suddenly, the whole sky drops like it's always only been a curtain at the back of a stage. Just like that, it's gone – the universe is no longer there. Instead, you see Jesus in glory.

Ready or not, there He is. The falling stars and failing sun are not an announcement that you have forty days left to prepare for His coming, giving you a timeframe in which you should get around to repenting and turning your life around. Rather, He clears them out of His way as He returns – and there He is, with no time left.

This complete lack of warning will annoy part of you, but let's face it: the part that is annoyed is your sinful nature.

For one thing, your sinful nature is naturally annoyed at Jesus, no matter what He does. If He arranged the stars as gigantic countdown timer for the last ten years before the end, your old Adam would be griping, "Just get this done already!" Since He doesn't give any signs, the lack of signs is the problem; because to old Adam, Jesus can't do anything right.

But for another, your sinful nature is always trying to hold out as much as possible, so it's got you thinking, "Okay, go ahead and be a Christian, but go ahead and hold onto your favorite bad habits and pet sins for a while yet. You've got time." Thus your old Adam is annoyed that the end comes so unexpectedly: I mean, if you knew the day and the time, you could just set a reminder on your phone for repentance about an hour before the sun shuts off. But the Lord doesn't provide your sinful self with a license to do whatever it wants, and then repent and bury the evidence fifteen minutes before the last trumpet sounds. How awful would that be for your soul! By then, your heart would be so hard that you'd just hit "snooze" and get back to sin.

So your sinful nature howls about how unfair Jesus is, and what makes His plan so much better anyway? Get this: Jesus would far rather have you live every day of your life assured of His love, certain of His grace and favor, and utterly, joyfully confident that you're prepared for His return.

That's how faith lives. Faith isn't impatient. It trusts that the Lord knows what He's doing, and that He's doing it for your good. It prays, "Lord come quickly" even as it prays "Your will be done." As long as the world continues as the dumpster fire it is because of sin, faith doesn't complain: it trusts that the Lord is still at work to gather His people. As long as the curse of sin damages lives and wreaks havoc, faith busies itself taking care of others. While the Lord tarries, faith lives in joyful expectation that He will keep His promises and come quickly – and if "quickly" means now without warning, faith lives for that surprise! When Jesus does return in glory, faith will live in the joy of the promise fulfilled.

Note that Jesus speaks next of that joy: when He returns in glory, "He will send out the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."

Your old Adam says, "You've still got time ... probably. The doors are open, so stay out here in the dark and cold until you see them start to swing, then mend your ways and slide through just before they clang shut. There's a bit of a risk, sure, but only because that Jesus is mean and unfair and doesn't give a signal that the doors are about to close." Faith says, "But why stay out there? The doors are open, and it's warm and light and joyful in here. Why would you wait?"

Face it: as long as you've got an old sinful nature, there's a part of you that will resent Jesus for not saying, "Go ahead and keep your favorite sins – I understand that life is tough, and I'll let you know when it's time to repent." He doesn't say that because He wants you forgiven, holy and confident that you're His every day of your life, not rolling the dice that you'll get things sorted out before you stand before His throne.

Faith delights to live each day confident of Christ's love and favor. If the Lord returns today, faith will declare, "Blessed be the name of the Lord!" If the Lord waits a thousand years, faith will live every single one of those days saying, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

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Whether it's today or a thousand years, Jesus is coming soon. That's the lesson of the fig tree: when the fig tree starts to bud and leaf, you know that winter has ended and summer is near – you know that the harvest is imminent. So Jesus tells you, "So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that He is near, at the very gates." What things will be taking place? The wars, rumors of war, earthquakes and other signs we heard about last week. The fig tree has leafed: Jesus could return today, for He is coming soon. The thing is that the word "soon" is rather elastic. For the Lord, a thousand years are like a day and a day is like a thousand years. Time flies for you and me too: I still consider myself to be relatively young, and yet – if God grants me the health and strength – I'm still looking at retirement in only about fifteen years. That time is going to fly by: my last confirmation class is almost born! I'd better prepare for that, as should the congregation. Whether you confront that prospect with sorrow or joyful anticipation, I leave to you! My point is that, either way, it will come soon.

The Lord is coming soon too – perhaps sooner! Again, faith says "Amen" and rejoices. It would be foolish to live unprepared for the Lord's return (or your exit from this world), especially since the Lord gives you no day and hour. Instead, He tells you to live in such a way that you are prepared. And how are you to be prepared? Easy. He says, "Stay awake."

"Stay awake." That's very good advice for during the sermon, by the way; but Jesus is speaking of something else. He tells a short parable to illustrate your life until the end. He says, "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and

commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.”

Once again, your sinful nature is going to be annoyed by this parable, because it wants you to hear this as Jesus – who is obviously no fun – saying something like, “You’d better be working hard when I arrive, or else.” But I would have you know that this parable is full of joy and comfort for you.

First off, my fellow believers, Jesus locates you in the house. You’re already inside, part of the household. He’s brought you out of the dark through the doors! As we said before, you’re not holding onto your favorite sins and scheming how you can enjoy them before you slip through the door at the last minute; neither are you shivering outside in the cold, wondering if Jesus will check your resumé and invite you in when He returns. You’re in the house already, because Jesus has brought you in. And although He compares you to servants in this parable, you know that He didn’t hire you on and say that your presence depends on your job performance. You weren’t hired – you were born, born again by water and the Word. Although you are a servant in the household of God, you are first and foremost a beloved child of God.

Second, the Lord has given you work to do in the house. This also is a matter of joy, because this is about your vocations and your callings: if you like, this is about the household chores you’re already doing. If God has called you to be married, then love your spouse. If God has called you to be a parent, then raise your kids in the teaching and admonition of the Lord. If your neighbor is lame, shovel the snow in their driveway. If you’re a teacher, teach. If you’re a student, study – even your Algebra 2. If you’re a driver, drive. If you’re a haberdasher, then go ... dash some habers.

If this seems disappointingly ordinary, note the first syllable “ord,” as in “ordered.” God orders the world to work according to His will, and He keeps His household in order in part by giving you various callings to keep things going in an orderly manner. This is always important, but I would say it is especially important when it comes to talking about the end times and the return of Christ in glory. Every now and then in history, a preacher goes a little bit nuts and decides that he has figured out the exact date that the world will end, which is really impressive when you consider that Jesus says in our text that not even He knows the day or the hour – at least, not according to His human nature. Knowing better than the incarnate Son of God, however, the aforementioned preacher convinces his followers that they must do some extraordinary things before that day and hour. You might find in history, for instance, a group that sells everything they have and gives away the proceeds, then meets together on a hilltop to await Jesus coming, only to find out that their preacher was a false prophet, life goes on and they now have nothing left. Just a few years back, we had the ironclad guarantee from a radio preacher in our own country who had his followers crisscrossing the United States in RVs because the end was really really going to happen this time. Really. And here we are.

The Lord does not say that, as the end approaches, you must forsake your family, home and job in order to do the twelve labors of Hercules. Instead, He tells you to be a Christian where He has placed you. In the parable, the master is supposed to find you going about your given tasks when He arrives. Even if you knew that the Lord was returning at noon this Tuesday, the most Christian thing you could do is treat tomorrow like every other day within your callings. If it’s laundry day, fold your week’s worth of socks like there are days to come ahead; and do so as one baptized and always joyful in God’s grace and mercy.

Well, fold your socks *and* stay awake. On the one hand, you don’t want to be out doing the twelve labors of Hercules and ignoring the tasks God has given; and on the other hand, you don’t want to be doing nothing and ignoring the tasks God has given – and ignoring the life God has given!

So stay awake – remain alive in Christ. Don't be the servant who skips meals and sleeps through the Supper. Your service and your labor don't keep you alive: God's grace does, and He gives it to you abundantly in His Word and His Supper. If you believe that a holy life is all about how you live now, then you're missing the important part: God keeps feeding you, strengthening your faith, forgiving your sins and keeping you alive. If He doesn't keep you alive and awake, you'll be asleep and unprepared for His return.

One more time, then, here's the contrast as you live and wait for the end to come. Your old Adam says, "I get that you want to go to heaven, but you want to live a little here. So I'd make use of the time if I were you. Live for yourself, have a little fun even if God frowns on the kind of fun you want to have, and keep an eye on the door – and just make sure you get inside before it swings shut. And if it does swing shut, you can always blame Jesus to comfort yourself as you ... spend eternity in outer darkness; but on the bright side, you did things your way."

Faith has quite a different thing to say. It says, "How good it is to be already in the house, brought in by God's gracious work in baptism. How good it is to live each day knowing that I am forgiven, that I have God's favor, and that I am His forever whether or not the world ends today. How wonderful it is to know that my daily tasks are pleasing to God, because He has given them to me to do. How marvelous that the Lord sustains me all my days with His Word and His Supper."

So your faith rejoices; and therefore, how joyful is the promise that Jesus is coming back! You don't know when, but you do not need to because it is all for your good. Jesus says it may be "in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning." You don't know when; but you do know that He has already come before, for evenings and midnights and mornings. On one evening, He gave you the gift of His Supper. And in the middle of that night, He was arrested in a garden while praying for you. When the rooster crowed the next dawn, He stood on trial and silently accepted accusations far more suited for you; and on that morning, He was led to a cross to die for your sins. Before that next evening, He was laid in a tomb – but on the morning of the first day of the week, He was risen again! And because He has died and He is risen, the death of your body – should He tarry – is only a sleep, and He will awaken you to everlasting life!

My friends in Christ, all this is yours because you are the holy people of God, all for the sake of Christ. Whenever the end comes, your salvation is sure because He promises, and His promises are sure. Why, He says so in the midst of this very text: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."

And among His words that never pass away are these, to you: "I forgive you all of yours sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen