

+ Mark 13:32-37 + Be Ready for the Lord's Return + 1st Sunday in Advent + 30 November 2008 +

“How do you stir a sleeping giant?” Very carefully, right? This question, however, is often asked of the Christian church—all who confess Jesus as our Savior from sin and hell. The Christian church is rightly considered a “giant” because there are hundreds of millions of believers all over the globe, but at the same time, it’s been found that about 85% of the church’s work is carried out by less than 15% of its members.

So how do you stir the sleeping giant of the Christian church or the smaller giant of our Wisconsin Synod? How do you stir all of us here at Cross of Christ to be involved with the Lord’s work before the Last Day comes? What will he find when he returns in glory? Will we be ready and working faithfully or will he find us idle and wasting the opportunities he gave us? In our lesson this morning, Jesus stirs up our hearts in these last days before his return. In all this he urges us, **BE READY FOR THE LORD’S RETURN!**

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” It was just days before Jesus’ suffering and death. He and his disciples were in Jerusalem for his last Passover. As they left the temple area, the disciples remarked how impressive the temple and its stones were, but Jesus shook them up when he told them not one stone would remain atop another. Upset the disciples asked when that would happen. The discussion soon turned to the Last Day.

We can understand why the disciples wanted to know when all this would take place. We all have wondered when the Lord would return. Trying to answer that question has proven to be big business for “experts” on the End Time, who use the Bible like some codebook to guess at a prediction.

...But what does Jesus say? **“No one knows about that day or hour.”** In fact, he adds, **“not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son”**. Yes, Jesus himself, but how is that possible? According to his human nature, Jesus did not know the day or hour when he would return to judge all people. That knowledge was something he “set aside” when he came to earth and took on human flesh. So we simply don’t know the “when”, but we do know he will return, as Jesus continues, **“Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.”**

You can’t help but feel urgency here when Jesus says, **“Be on guard! Be alert!”** He wants to stir us up, so we’ll be ready for his return. In the original Greek, these phrases paint a picture of someone expecting to see something happen at any moment, so he doesn’t allow himself to get drowsy in the process. Jesus wants us to “be wide awake” as we “keep on looking for him”, because he could come at any moment.

He underscores that with another picture—that of a man who has to go to a faraway country for an unknown period of time, so he leaves his servants in charge of his house. If the man’s servants had known he would be away for a long time, they could become lazy and lethargic. Wouldn’t we be tempted to become spiritually lazy and lethargic if we knew Jesus wouldn’t return for a long time? It’s really a gift of God’s grace that the Father has not revealed the “when” of Jesus’ return. Still Christ has revealed it will definitely happen.

Shouldn’t that dramatically change the way we live our lives? Shouldn’t that lead us to live as “end-time Christians,” instead of “we-still-have-a-long-long-time Christians”? Our Lord entered this world, suffered, and died for one reason: He wanted to rescue us from sin and hell in order to take us to live with him forever when he returns. Should that not then compel us to live as people who are continually “looking up,” wondering if this is the day or hour our Lord will come back to take us home?

Such an “End-Time” view of life changes how we view our earthly lives and the end of life. We need to ask ourselves, “If Jesus returned tomorrow, would I be ready?” or “If I were to die tonight, would I be ready to face my Lord?” We don’t normally think this way, but even so we do know we will see the Lord, either at his return or at death. Therefore, we need to consider what we’re emphasizing in our lives. Jesus suggests that very strongly in his picture: **“It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.”**

Did you notice the two little phrases in Jesus’ illustration – **“He...puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task...”**? All the servants were put in charge of the work of the household while the owner was away, but each servant had a specific task. In a similar way, Christ has entrusted all of us with the work of his church to “run” it until he returns. To do that, our Lord gives each **“his assigned task.”** Each of us has some responsibility the Lord has entrusted to him or her.

So what's your **"task"**? What responsibility in his church has the Lord entrusted to you to carry out? Most of us might be surprised when asked that question. "My task?" I don't know. Do I even *have* any special work to do in the church?" Have you ever thought about it? You might be faithful in church attendance, attend Bible Study or Sunday School regularly, and occasionally "help out" on this or that, all of which are good, but have you ever thought about what particular responsibility God has assigned to you?

Look again at what the Head of the church says here. He tells us, **"He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task..."** Our Lord gives a special task to each and every one of us—from the youngest child to the oldest adult. Our God has graciously taken us humble jars of clay and turned us into his sacred vessels by the cleansing blood of his Son. His redeeming love has raised each of us up from being unworthy sinners to being his own coworkers in the work of spreading the Gospel. So each has some work to do for the Lord.

Is this how the Lord stirs us up—by making each of us aware that he himself has entrusted us with some work? Do you and I need to think about that more as the Last Day approaches? Do we need to remind one another that our Lord has given each of us some work to do? Do we need to help each other see what our particular work might be?

As part of that consideration, we may also need to consider how we use our financial resources for the Lord's work. God has richly blessed us, even in these difficult economic times. Look at the homes in which we live, the cars we drive, the clothes we wear. We have the Lord's blessings in **"good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over"**. Do we need to reexamine how we use the financial blessings God has given us? Does the Lord get our first fruits or the leftovers? I know this is a "touchy" subject, because we don't normally like to talk about money, but as we consider what task the Lord has given us to carry out, maybe we also need to consider making our wallets part of our response to that work.

We want to give this serious consideration, because we, who have work to do, will also have to give an account to our Lord, as our text says: **"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. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"**

Did you notice where the emphasis is in this part of Jesus' story? It's on the doorkeeper—the man who guards the door to the house and opens it when the owner arrives. The owner of the house gives each servant a certain responsibility, but he gives special instructions to the doorkeeper. He tells him, "Watch. Be always alert. Be looking for my return at any hour." The doorkeeper had to be always alert for his master's return, so he could open the door as soon as he arrived. He was also to encourage the other servants to watchfulness in how they were carrying out their work before the master's return—to stir them up in their service. Their master would return soon and all would have to give an account to him

Jesus applies this parable to all of us. All of us are to **"keep watch"**, because all of us **"will have to give an account"**. Are you ready to do that? If our Lord returned this week, would you be ready to let him know how you've used the resources and opportunities he gave you in your life?

As your doorkeeper, I encourage you to consider those questions. I encourage you to consider what your motivation will be to have greater watchfulness as you use the resources, responsibilities and opportunities God gives you to serve him. Your motivation is, of course, found not within you or in some desire to earn God's favor, but on a lonely hill outside of Jerusalem 2000 years ago, on a rough, wooden cross where Jesus, the King of kings, displayed the full measure of his love for you. Your motivation is found in the Savior who first loved you and gave himself for you. Your motivation is found in the depths of the incomparable love Jesus showed you in rescuing you from sin and hell. It is his love that **"compels"** you and me and all believers in Christ to faithfully work for him in all aspects of our lives and give him our best—not to earn anything, but to give thanks.

So how do we stir the sleeping giant of our synod, including our own congregation? We don't. Jesus does. When we go back to Calvary and see once more the **"love divine, all love excelling"** Jesus exhibited there, then and only then can we be ready for his glorious return on the Last Day. So with the ancient words of the prayers for Advent, we pray, **"Stir up your power, O Lord, and come."** Amen.