

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 18th, 2018
26th Sunday after Pentecost: Be Alert!
Rev. John Crow

Daniel 12:1-13
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:31-39
Mark 13:14-23

When I was at West Point, we had a silly saying we would repeat often during summer military training: *Be alert—the world needs more lerts*. As I said, it was silly. The point was, don't miss out on important instructions designed to keep you and your fellow cadets safe. We also needed to be aware of our surroundings. This applied to learning how to rappel down a cliff, assault an enemy position, and throwing a live hand grenade, to name a few.

Be alert! We see street signs designed to make us take caution: railroad crossing, construction ahead, windy road, or my favorite: free range area. There's no way around it; there are certain areas of our life where we need to be alert.

Regarding our spiritual life, Jesus tells us the same thing. No dozing when your salvation is on the line. If you were alert during today's Scripture readings, you know we have some doozies. I'll thank Pastor Thelander for that later. But there

is one overarching message from today's reading in Mark chapter 13: Watch out! Be alert! Being spiritually alert to Jesus' message here requires us to know the signs, avoid the pitfalls, and stay faithful.

Just as in driving, signs of the end times tell us what is ahead. We should know what those signs are, not so we can make predictions that hit the headlines, but so we can be prepared. So what are the signs? To give a full recounting, we need to go back a little farther in the chapter than today's lectionary does. Verse six says there will be many who falsely claim to be Christ. Verse seven says there will be wars and rumors of wars. Verse eight tells us there will be earthquakes and famines. Verse twelve tells us that family members will turn on each other. Verse 13 echoes today's reading in Hebrews ten by warning that Christ followers will be hated. Lastly, verse 14 tells us that "the sacrilegious object that causes desecration" will be standing where it should not be.

These signs are clear as day, right? Mark seems to think so, saying in verse 14, "reader, pay attention!" which should be translated, "let the reader understand" (NASB). In other words, the writer of Mark isn't hiding anything from his readers. I think I better take a short sidetrack here to find out what Mark's audience in the

late 1st century would have clearly understood that we do not. First, Mark's use of the phrase *sacrilegious object that causes desecration* (which is more literally translated *the abomination that causes desolation*) would have immediately been understood as a reference to Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and the one in today's Old Testament reading, Daniel 12:11. Daniel was almost certainly referring to the events that occurred under Antiochus IV, King of Syria, in 168-167 BCE. This Seleucid king faced military setbacks in Egypt, and out of anger ended the regular Jewish sacrifices, plundered the temple in Jerusalem, and set up a pagan altar there.

So why was Jesus warning his disciples about something that had happened about 200 years prior? Well—he wasn't. He may have used the same phrase *abomination that causes desolation*, which was on purpose, but He wasn't referring to the same events. You know the phrase, *history repeats itself*? It's sort of like that. Jesus is purposely drawing on a known excruciatingly painful event in the history of the Jewish people to draw a connection to events that were about to occur. Another way to look at it is as a "type". Joshua is considered a "type" of Jesus, not only because the names are cognates of each other, but also because Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land, just as Jesus leads His followers into the *eternal* promised land. In the same way, *the abomination that causes*

desolation of Daniel was a type of *the abomination that causes desolation* for Jesus. But it doesn't end there.

Remember, Mark believed his readers would understand the reference, so it had to be an event that had taken place between when Jesus spoke the words and when the Gospel of Mark was written, or it could be an event that was expected to take place in the immediate future at the time of writing. The dating of Mark's gospel is commonly thought to be around the years 65-70. You probably recognize the date 70 CE as the year the temple was destroyed, which Jesus clearly referred to in Mark 13:2, which was what started this whole conversation that we read today. The war with the Romans started at least three years earlier, so was likely raging during the time Mark's gospel was written, and certainly weighed heavy in his mind as he recorded the life of Jesus. Also, because it was Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction that started this discussion, that is the most likely event that He is referring to when He used the phrase *abomination that causes desolation*. More specifically, it probably refers to the soon-to-be-emperor Titus entering the temple, and according to the historian Josephus, entering the holy place, and having his troops bring in the Roman eagle standard, and loudly proclaim Titus as emperor. Again, this was a type of Daniel's abomination, both of which were "unspeakable affronts... to God himself" (Word Biblical Commentary, Craig Evans, 318).

So what does that have to do with us today? Why should we be alert to events that happened 1900 years ago? Remember, I said it doesn't end there. Jesus was making a double prediction! Not only was He talking about the destruction of the temple, which Mark's readers would have understood as already having happened, or very likely to happen in the near future; but Christ was also talking about the end times. Clearly, when He said in verses 19 and 20 that the tribulation would be the worst in human history, and that if not for God's mercy would result in the end of humanity, He was NOT referring to the destruction of the temple. That was bad for Jews, but hardly cataclysmic for all mankind. And if we keep reading past verse 23, Jesus continues His predictions in the same conversation, which includes the return of the Son of Man "coming in clouds" (v 26). These are definitely eschatological events to which we should be alert! So what is *the abomination that causes desolation* for which we should be on the lookout in the 21st century? Are you ready for it? I have no idea. None whatsoever. Whatever it is, it will be an unimaginable affront to God himself. Worse than burning Bibles. I think it will be one of those situations where you know it when you see it, and thanks to social media and 24-hour cable news, I'm sure EVERYONE will see it.

Phew! Did I lose anyone? I bet you weren't expecting Biblical Prophecy 101 when you came to church today. But I do think that was necessary. OK, now back to our regularly scheduled sermon.

As I mentioned earlier, being alert to the signs Jesus gave us is NOT for the purpose of making predictions. Pretty much everyone who has ever made an end-times prediction has ended up being wrong. This doesn't really help our testimony as believers to make predictions based on the Bible that turn out to be inaccurate. We should, however, be prepared. Being prepared DOES NOT mean buying a cabin in the mountains and stocking it with food and ammo. It means being spiritually prepared for whatever happens. We do that by avoiding the pitfalls Jesus warned of and staying faithful. I'll spend the rest of my time on these two topics.

I see two pitfalls that Jesus warned of in this passage. The first is the pitfall of thinking that we can wait to get prepared when the time comes. His dire warnings in verses 15-18 make it clear that when the tribulation comes, there won't be time to prepare—it will be too late. It's sort of like a high school student waking up the morning of the SAT and deciding to start studying. Sorry, that aint going to cut it.

When spiritual challenges come, they are almost always unexpected. How one reacts in the moment is a result of how they have been living up until then. One doesn't develop godly character in an instant. It's like Meghan Vogel, the high school track star a few years ago who stopped to help a competitor who fell and got hurt. That decision was a natural extension of the character she was developing every day. The time to prepare is NOW.

The other pitfall Jesus warns of is found in verses 21 and 22, which echoes His earlier warning from verses five and six: anti-Christ's will attempt to deceive believers into following them. Now Jesus didn't use the term *anti-christ*, but *false Messiah* is what *anti-christ* means. And please note: I'm not talking about THE ANTICHRIST, but rather many deceivers. The sad thing is, many of these anti-Christ's will likely come from inside the church. Jesus' warning is specifically about people who claim to be Him, and will probably be able to work wonders. But just as dangerous are those who don't claim to be Christ, yet spread false doctrines. No generation has been without these heretics in sheep's clothing. If you think about it, we probably all know people who follow one false doctrine or another that so alters their understanding of who God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit is, that we have serious doubts about their salvation.

How do we avoid this pitfall ourselves? The best way not to fall for the false teachings of an anti-christ is to know the Scriptures. You notice that we read a lot of Scripture every Sunday at Epworth. That is not by accident. I also encourage you to read, meditate on, and memorize Scripture on your own. Hide it in your heart. Fill your mind with the words of Jesus, because the best way to know a fake when you see it, is to know the real thing. I am told that people who are experts at recognizing counterfeit money become that way not by studying fakes, but by studying real cash. If you want to avoid being deceived by false teachings, fill your heart and mind with the Word of God. Believe me, the pitfalls of thinking you can prepare later, and falling for spiritual deceivers are both very real and present right now. Just as we do not know the hour of Jesus' return, we do not know the hour when we die. Whichever event occurs first, we must avoid the pitfalls of which Jesus warned us.

The other way in which we stay spiritually prepared is by staying faithful. If you are really alert this morning, you are probably wondering, *where did he get "stay faithful" from today's reading?* Yes, our reading in Hebrews 10:36 does mention "patient endurance", but in the gospel, it's actually in the verse preceding today's

reading. The second half of verse 13 says, “the one who endures to the end will be saved”. This promise is mirrored in verse 27, where Jesus says He will “gather His chosen ones from all over the world”. Without these bookends on today’s reading, it’s a pretty grim message. There are some truly terrifying images that Jesus lays out for us, but the truth is this—if we stay faithful, Jesus won’t abandon us. That doesn’t necessarily mean for those who are alive in that day that they won’t experience tribulations unlike anything we’ve seen before, but it does mean that Christ will maintain His Church. We won’t be alone.

As I said a moment ago, these pitfalls Jesus warns of still apply whether we live to see the end times or not. So what does it look like to endure or stay faithful? How does one do it? For starters, you are on the right track because you are here today. Staying connected to a community of believers is one of the best ways to stay faithful. We encourage each other and pray for each other. We rely on one another’s spiritual strengths. Our worship forms us into Christlikeness. But even with the best congregations, merely attending the Sunday service is not enough.

We need to be discipled into an ever-deepening relationship with Christ, which simply cannot happen effectively in a worship service. We need to get personal

with other believers whose lives we want to emulate, just as the twelve disciples did with Jesus. That means living our daily Christian walk in community. We need to allow other mature Christians to speak into our lives. We need to be able to ask for specific prayers for our struggles. These conditions are almost exclusively found in life groups and one-on-one discipling relationships. If church is like medical school, preparing us to offer the healing of wounded souls through Christ, then small groups are the internship and one-on-one discipleship is the residency. Just as you wouldn't want a doctor who hasn't been through residency, you wouldn't expect to find a mature Christian who hasn't been discipled. Of course, it's not possible to stay faithful without also having regular time of private prayer and Scripture reading, any more than it is to remain close to a friend you never see or talk to. These are all powerful ways to endure to the end, whether that end is the day you die, or the day Christ returns.

But none of this matters if you haven't accepted the call of Christ in your heart already. Jesus' words of warning to be alert cannot be applied by someone who isn't yet alert to their own spiritual condition. We will be receiving the Eucharist in a few minutes, and as we will recite shortly, we offer it freely to all who are aware of their "utter sinfulness and helplessness apart from Christ". That is the only qualification. That's the same qualification for receiving Christ into your

heart as your Lord and Savior. In other words, coming down front to receive communion is our alter call at Epworth. If you want Christ's promise never to abandon you, no matter what you have done or what tribulation you face, then tell Him you accept His offer of forgiveness of sin, His offer of the Holy Spirit to empower you to withstand temptation, His offer to be your eternal sovereign, and the offer of His very body and blood in the elements of the bread and wine. He offers us all these things and more, if we will just accept Him and reject sin.

This coming Thursday is a little civic holiday you may have heard of:

Thanksgiving. It is ALWAYS a good idea to be thankful for all the blessing we receive. But because no other blessing could possibly match the mind-blowing grace of God, let's not overlook that one when we're staring at the turkey. I encourage everyone here today to pay particular attention to our many spiritual blessings this Thanksgiving, which come to us for one simple reason: God is love. The best way to demonstrate your thankfulness is to willingly accept God's love and forgiveness, whether for the first time, or as a continuing habit of gratitude.

If you feel the tug of Christ on your heart for the first time this morning, please, receive Holy Communion with joy, and don't keep it a secret. For the rest of you,

some of whom have been walking with Christ faithfully for many decades, you too can receive the Eucharist with joy, as a tiny foretaste of the great feast that awaits all those throughout time, who have remained spiritually alert.

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