

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.³⁴ 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.

³⁵ “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.³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’ ” (Mark 13:32-37)

Jesus says, “Watch!”

Last Monday, my wife’s car was towed to the dealership to get a new radiator. They promised me it would be ready on Tuesday afternoon. Well, on Wednesday, they called to tell me that they were still waiting for parts. But before I could even lose my temper, they told me they were going to give me a rental car. So they sent a driver over to pick it up. Well, I spent the next forty-five minutes working in my office and trying to watch for the car at the same time. I opened the door to the narthex and then I kept walking back and forth. I didn’t want to miss my ride. We’ve all had those kinds of experiences, right? Waiting for a repairman or a tow truck or a ride. Even when they give you a two hour window, you’re still stuck waiting and watching for them to come.

Jesus uses a different picture this morning, but his point is the same. We’re waiting for him to come. His picture works a little better than ours, because we have doorbells, so we don’t actually have to keep looking out the window. Jesus pictures a man who has gone on a journey and left his servants at home, with jobs to do. One servant’s job is to keep the door. He has to be ready to let the owner in when he comes back. The last thing the owner said to him before he left was, “Watch for me to come back.” And Jesus says the same thing to us today. **Jesus says, “Watch!”**

I.

Now, who is he talking to? Jesus says, **“He [the owner] leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.”** At first glance, it looks a little like he’s saying, “Everyone has their assigned tasks, and some of you are watchmen.” That wouldn’t be an unscriptural thought. Jesus was actually talking to his disciples here, not to a big crowd at the temple. So it would be easy to see this as a lesson about the role of pastors watching over the flock while the members do the things God gave them to do. And it is absolutely true that God calls us to different kinds of things in life. Not everyone belongs in the ministry. Computer programmer and factory workers and housewives all have God pleasing jobs. God lets us decide for ourselves what professions we’re going to follow and what jobs we’re going to take. His only requirement is that we do all those things in a way that gives glory to him. But is that the point here? It really isn’t and you see that from the last line of the text. Jesus said, **“What I say to you [the twelve disciples], I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”** Jesus didn’t tell this parable just for pastors and teachers. He told it for all of us. My friends, **Jesus says, “Watch!” He says it to you.**

What does he mean by that? Let’s let Jesus speak for himself. In addition to saying **“Keep watch!”** he says **“Be on guard!”** That reminds us that the watchman wasn’t only waiting for the owner’s return. He had another function: to keep the household safe while he was gone. The Roman Empire had a major problem with crime. They couldn’t just dial 911 and the police would be on their way. So there were gangs of robbers who ambushed travelers on the road. They broke into houses and robbed and killed or kidnapped people. So houses were built with heavy doors that could be barred and people kept weapons in their homes and servants who knew how to use them.

Crime is a problem for us, too, but that’s not the point. Jesus is talking about his return. He’s not talking about making sure that you have all your stuff when he gets here. He’s talking about protecting your greatest treasure: your faith. The devil wants to rob you of your faith. He attacks it in different ways. The most obvious is temptation. He wants us to sin. Now, we’re all sinners and Jesus died and paid for all our sins, so we are forgiven. But that doesn’t mean that sinning is no big deal. In fact, one of the most dangerous temptations that the devil uses against us is getting us to not take sin seriously. “Everybody does it.” “There are lots of worse people out there than me.” “What’s the big deal?” That’s when sin is dangerous. When you

feel guilty and right away you repent, sin is dealt with. But when you shrug it off, when you make excuses for it, when you don't think it's anybody's business but your own, sin is beating down your door, trying to kill your faith.

That's not the devil's only tactic. He also uses pain and suffering here. God sends those things to purify our faith. God lets us struggle to teach us to hang on to him in hard times. But the devil tries to undermine God's lesson. He wants us to be angry at God. He wants us to think that God's not being fair – there are so many worse people than me. How come I have to go through this? What did I do? He wants us to curl up into a ball and obsess about how bad we feel and convince ourselves that God doesn't love us and there just is no reason to go on living.

There's at least one more way the devil tries to beat down our door: he turns blessings against us. God loves us, so he gives us all kinds of blessings. Spouses and children are blessings. Jobs and homes and nice clothes are blessings. Our computers and our cars and our tablets and smart phones are all blessings. But the devil works in our sinful hearts to make them all curses. He makes us discontent. He did that to me, a little bit, with that rental car. The car we had repaired is over ten years old and has 160,000 miles on it. But Enterprise gave me a nice, new Ford Escape. There was a part of me that wasn't happy we were fixing that old car. The devil wanted me to think that God's gift of a car that has served us well for ten years wasn't really all that great. At the same time, the devil gets us to use God's good gifts in sinful ways. We spend hours in front of computer screens but can't remember the last real conversation we had with our spouse. We fly 90 miles an hour down the highway and honk at people who are only doing 80.

All those things are attacks on our faith. If we let those attitudes take control of our heart, the devil wins. So Jesus tells us all to keep watch. He tells us all to be on guard. We need that reminder. Can't we all think of times when someone called us on a sin, and our first response was to defend that sin? Can't we all think of excuses we've made and continue to make? Can't we all think of times we weren't content with what God gave us or we misused his gifts to harm our own faith? All that is sin. It all deserves God punishment in hell. Of course, that's why the devil keeps attacking us in those ways. They work.

But Jesus came to forgive even those sins. Jesus was perfect in all that he did. He never gave in to temptation. He never whined when he hurt. He never was dissatisfied with what God gave him and he never misused those gifts. He was perfect in our place. He died and paid for the sin that we are guilty of. He opened God's record and he used his blood to bleach away every entry of every sin that we have ever committed. He rose to tell us they are all gone. He rose to tell us that when God looks at us sees nothing but his perfect children. He rose to promise us life with him.

That is the key to watching, to being on guard. Every time we go back to Jesus, God renews our faith. So now we treasure life with him and resist sin. Now, we can't be perfect here. We can't keep sinful thoughts from entering our minds. But Martin Luther once said, "You can't keep the birds from flying over your head. But you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." The devil is going to bang on the door of our heart. But Christ gives us the strength not to let him in. Christ leads us to repent when Satan breaks the door down. Jesus sweeps up the wreckage and rehangs the door and he starts us over again with a clean slate. Going to Jesus leads us to keep watch over our lives.

II.

But Jesus doesn't just tell us to be on guard. In fact, that isn't even his main point here. Jesus' primary focus is on watching for him. He tells us to do that because he loves us. My friends, **Jesus says, "Watch!" He does that for your good.**

Jesus said, "**Be alert!**" Being on guard means watching for a threat. Being alert means being active and engaged. Some mornings when I teach catechism class, not every eleven or twelve year old is bright eyed and ready to learn. Sometimes, they stay up too late at night. Sometimes, even after their parents send them to bed, their minds are going a hundred miles an hour and it takes them awhile to get to sleep. So when they're sitting at their desks in the morning, they stare off into space or move really slowly. We might see them fighting to keep their eyes open. Even if they succeed, how much are they really taking in when they're that sleepy?

Jesus isn't talking about the benefits of getting a good night's sleep before work or school. He's talking about being spiritually alert so can see what's really happening in our lives. He's talking about being refreshed and active in our faith. He warns against the owner coming at a time when the doorkeeper has fallen asleep. What makes us spiritually drowsy? Isn't it thinking that what we see here is the end all and be all of our

existence? Isn't it wearing ourselves out with worry or concern here and forgetting to recharge our spiritual batteries? Christmas shopping season is in full force – and I've barely begun. I already have a dozen different things on my calendar and every week, I feel more and more pressured to get things knocked out. There are so many family responsibilities and special meals and get-togethers. There just aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done. When all that stuff crowds out our spiritual life, when it cheats us of the real meaning of Advent and Christmas, we're drifting off to sleep spiritually.

Then we forget to watch for Jesus. We don't know when he's coming back. It's been two thousand years. Do we really expect to see him in our lifetime? God designed the church to live in constant expectation that Jesus could come at any moment. But as time has gone by, that's gotten harder and harder for us to do. We just don't expect Jesus will come on some Thursday afternoon. In our minds, there has to be some big reason for the moment to come. But Jesus said, **“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.”** He could come at any time of the day or night. He could come when things are really, really bad and also when things seem to be humming right along. He could come today. Or he might wait another thousand years. We just don't know. So he tells us to be ready.

It's a little bit like telling your kids to fasten their seatbelts. How many thousands of hours do you drive without having an accident? When you finally do have one, do you know before you get in the car that this was going to be the day, so this time, we better buckle up? Of course not! So we always have our kids buckle their seatbelts because it will be too late to do it when the car starts to slide on the ice. Being prepared spiritually is the same thing. You buckle your spiritual seatbelt when you feed your faith. You come and hear about Jesus. You read your Bible and you come to communion and you remember your baptism and you hear that your sins are forgiven. If today is the day Jesus comes back, if today is the day that he calls you home and you see him that way, you want to be ready.

That's the point of Jesus telling you to watch. He's not telling you to walk around looking up into the sky. He's not telling you to keep watch so you don't miss it. When he comes, you won't be able to miss it, even if you're in a cave. Watching for Christ means taking care of your faith and living that faith in your daily battle with sin. It means being ready to go home to heaven – by being run over by a bus or by seeing your Savior come in the clouds accompanied by all the hosts of heaven. Be ready. Be on guard. Keep watch. And know that Jesus is with you. He will keep your faith alive and he will bring you home. Amen.