

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, 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 their 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)

What do We do While We Wait for Jesus?

“I hate waiting.” You might recognize that line from the movie *The Princess Bride*. Inigo is stuck at the top of cliff waiting to dual the masked stranger and the stranger tells him he’s just going to have to wait until he gets to the top. And Inigo says, “I hate waiting.” I could’ve coined that line. I hate waiting at red lights. I hate waiting in lines. I hate waiting for people to show up. I hate waiting. Guess what? Our gospel lesson for today tells us that the Christian life is pretty much an exercise in waiting. Jesus has gone away and we are waiting for him to come back. Today, we begin the season of Advent. Advent is all about believers waiting for God to keep his promises. Waiting is hard. Most of us don’t like it. And even the Bible pictures believers in heaven asking Jesus, “How long?” But Advent isn’t just about waiting. It’s also about the trust that makes that waiting possible. Our faith gives our waiting an air of hope and confidence. And it also makes the time we are waiting productive. This time of waiting isn’t supposed to be a time when we just sit around. God wants us to use this time well. So, this morning we want to focus on Jesus’ words in our gospel lesson and ask, **What do we do while we wait for Jesus?**

Waiting is not something new in the New Testament. Faith in the Old Testament was all about waiting, too. Old Testament believers were waiting for Jesus to come. But in the Old Testament, the focus was a little different. They were waiting for a Messiah who would be both Savior and Judge. Of course, Jesus is both of those things. But to the Old Testament believer, it was not at all clear that Jesus would come twice, first to save the world and then later to judge the world. Partly, that’s because of the way God chose to reveal the future to them. In the Old Testament, he often talks about Jesus saving and Jesus judging in the same breath. He does things like putting the final resurrection in the same prophecy that talks about the child being born in Bethlehem. God didn’t spend a lot of time spelling out for them that at least two thousand years would pass between those two events.

Why did God reveal it that way? For the people who lived in the Old Testament era, both of those comings were in the far distant future. When the Old Testament was done, four hundred more years would pass before Jesus was born. If you go all the back to Moses, it would be 1500 years before Jesus was born. The fact that Jesus would come twice didn’t really matter for the faith of people whose grandchildren would be long dead before he came the first time. The important thing was for them to trust that the Messiah would come and save them from sin and death and hell, and that he would judge the world and take believers to eternal life. The rest was just details that God needed to take care of. Their job was to wait for God to do what he promised.

We are still waiting today. Our faith is just like the faith of the Old Testament believer. But there is one big difference. We live in between those two comings, so it does matter to our faith that they are not the same. God speaks to us about Jesus’ first coming as history. He gives us all kinds of facts and details and those details matter because God is establishing the truth of what he did. Our faith depends on Jesus really being born in a stable and dying on a cross and rising from the dead. But it also depends on God keeping the promises that we are still waiting for: Jesus has to return and judge the world. He has to undo all that sin has done to this world and raise the dead and bring his people into eternal life. That is the goal of our faith. It’s what makes all the waiting worthwhile.

When it comes to the waiting, just like those Old Testament believers, we trust what God promises and let him work out the details. Like them, we don’t know how long we will have to wait. That is what Jesus really focuses on in our gospel lesson for today because it’s the hardest part of waiting. For kids in school waiting for the school day to end, the last hour or two can seem really long, even though they knew when school will get

out. But if you go in for surgery and it's scheduled at 9 am. and at 10 am, the doctor still hasn't come yet, and all they tell you is that there's been a delay, and you don't know how long it will be before they finally get started, that is much harder. That's what it's like to wait for Jesus to come back.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus says that no one knows when he's coming. He says, **"It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch."** The master doesn't tell his servants how long he's going to be gone or when they should expect him to be back. That's his business. He's the master. He tells them what they should be doing while he's gone. That's their business. Now, do you think they liked it like that? Probably not. But they were servants and that's just the way it was. We are servants. We don't get to know when Jesus will return. We may not like it like that. But that's just the way it is.

Faith trusts that God does it that way for our own good. While we can't know all that God knows, we can imagine what might have happened if two thousand years ago Jesus had said, "I'll be coming back in January of 2025." For two thousand years, the church would've have had to worry about it. It wouldn't have had to take seriously the command to watch and wait. The damage to our faith and our work would've been immeasurable. Faith is trusting God's promises, knowing that he does all things for our good.

That does mean we do the things he commands us to do. So, what does Jesus picture us, his servants, doing while we wait? He says that the master gives each servant his assigned task. On a big estate in the ancient world, there would've been crops to plant and harvest. There would've been animals to feed and maintenance to do on property and buildings and probably a lot more. The master would want the estate to be functioning and profitable while he was gone and in good repair when he got back. So, he would've given the servants specific jobs to do while he was gone.

Jesus has assigned each of us a place in life. We're supposed to be doing our work as spouses and parents and children. So, we should be loving and honoring the spouse God gave us, and supporting them in their faith. We should be teaching and disciplining and encouraging our children in their faith and in their preparations for life. We should be honoring our parents and obeying them while we are young and caring for them when they are old. But there's more. We should be good citizens of this world. That means being good neighbors and good friends. It means obeying the law and also being a force for justice in our society. It means helping people in need and doing all we can to ease the hurts that life in a sinful world brings.

Then there's our spiritual work: spreading the gospel. God calls all of us to support the church, to participate in the preaching and teaching of the word, to reach out to those who are lost. To do all that, we need to the most important part of the work Jesus gave us to do: feed our own faith. Jesus said that one servant was the doorkeeper. His job was to watch. That's us. In the ancient world, crime was a huge problem, so rich people built their houses like fortresses. They had thick doors that could be barred from the inside. And the doorkeeper stood just inside that barred door and watched through a little window. If the owner were away, the doorkeeper had to remove the bar and open the door when the owner came back. The owner wouldn't want to stand out there for hours waiting. And it wasn't up to the owner to make sure he arrived at a time that was convenient for the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper had to keep watch. He had to stay awake so he could open that door if the owner came at midnight or early in the morning. That's the point Jesus is making. He will come when God determines that it is time to come. And our job is to be ready.

Jesus said, **"If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping."** What does it mean to be sleeping when Jesus comes? It could mean different things. We don't really expect Jesus to come in our lifetime, so we think we have until the end of our lives to take this stuff seriously. Or we're frustrated with the way Jesus is ruling the world and with the demands that faith makes on our lives, and so we're going to live the way our society tells us to live rather than how Jesus tells us to live. Or we're drifting spiritually. We don't come to his house. We don't open our Bibles. We don't feed our faith.

Could that happen to us? It wouldn't surprise me if you're not all that worried about it. After all, you're here in church on the Sunday of a holiday weekend. Surely, you will never fall asleep spiritually. I hope and pray that's true. But St. Paul said, **"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"** Jesus said these words specifically to his disciples just a couple of days before he died. They had been with him for three years. They had left everything to follow him. And he warned them not to fall asleep spiritually during the long years while they would wait for him to return. He gives us the same warning.

Are we going to take it seriously? Or do we feel like that's all this is a little over the top? Are we weary of how hard it is to stand firm in the truth in world that really doesn't want to hear it? Are we discouraged because our society is running away from Christianity so fast? Or do we perhaps want a church that accepts more of what our society says, that fights less with the world around us? All that is falling asleep spiritually. Jesus told us to watch. That means that every day, we take our faith seriously. That means that we are on guard against the way that the devil and the world sneak into our hearts. That means that we know that following Jesus means leaving this world behind. It means being unpopular and giving up opportunities and maybe even relationships here. Are we ready to do that?

Our sinful nature isn't. Our sinful nature wants to go to sleep. And don't we all have to admit that sometimes, we do? For that sin, we deserve to have Jesus tell us, "Depart from me into the hell prepared for the devil and his angels." That's what we deserve. But it's not what we will get, because Jesus died and paid even for all that's wrong with our faith. He died and paid even for all our spiritual sleepiness. He died and paid for all the times we gave into temptation and stopped watching for him. His blood washed all that sin away. We are forgiven.

But that doesn't change Jesus' call for us to watch, because the only way for us to lose our faith is if we walk away from it. Jesus will protect us from the devil and the sinful world. Jesus will protect us even if we have to suffer persecution and death. But if we choose to turn our backs on our faith, if we starve our faith to death, we can kill it. Nothing would make Jesus sadder than to watch us walk away from eternal life. Because he loves us, he calls us to watch and wait. He calls us to feed our faith and be ready. And while we wait, he calls us to do all that work we talked about before. And he promises that he will work while we feed our faith. He will come to us every time we hear the gospel, every time we come to communion, every time we confess our sins and are forgiven, and he will renew our faith. That is the key to watching. That is what God calls us to do while we wait. So watch, my friends. Watch over your faith. Wait for you Lord. He is coming for you. Amen.