

*Be on Guard! Be Alert!*

Mark 13:24-37

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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First Sunday in Advent

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At our Thanksgiving Day service, I shared that I was planning to cook our first real Thanksgiving dinner since Isaac's birth. Well, here's what happened. I prepped the turkey just like I had seen it done on a couple of Food Network shows, put it in a roasting bag, and popped it in the oven. According to the roasting bag, my turkey needed just two and-a-half hours at 350 degrees. Two and-a-half-hours later, I opened the oven and... *voila!*—my turkey was obviously overcooked! I stuck in my brand-new digital meat thermometer. Most people—including our resident turkey expert, Gene Kaneshiro, say 170 degrees is fine. I watched as very quickly my digital readout sped past that mark and kept climbing—180...190...all the way to 195 degrees!

Fortunately, because I used a bag, the dark meat was fine. But the white meat was definitely on the dry and brittle side. Even the gourmet cranberry sauce we had couldn't rescue it. Maybe turkey soup can.

Here's the lesson of the story. Even when you think you've got it all in the bag, in cooking as in life, it pays to be on guard and to keep alert!

Our reading this morning describes the Second Coming of Jesus. It ties in with today being the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of a four-week period that the church has traditionally used to prepare for Christmas. In Advent, both the First Coming at Christmas, as well as the Second Coming of Jesus are brought into our Bible readings because these two events are related, and because we live in the gap between the two.

But what a difference in feeling there is between the First Advent and the Second! If we think of Christmas, we think of holiday cheer, of light, feasting and festivity—of *Joy to the World*. If we think of the Second Coming, it's the reverse: not holiday cheer, but Armageddon fear; not light, but dark; not feasting but starvation; not *Joy to the World*, but *the end* of the world.

Advent is important because it helps us relate these two foundational Christian events. It offers to help us frame our own Christian walks in the light of God's revelation. In short, it helps us heed Jesus' urgent warning: *Be on guard! Be alert! ... What I say to you, I say to everyone, "Watch!"*

In our own day and situation, perhaps the most important thing to point out about this passage is the contrast between Jesus' warning to *Watch* and his very plain statement in verse 32 that *No one knows about that day or hour, not even*

*the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* In other words, Jesus is exhorting us to be alert and to be on guard, but not to speculate or to play guessing games at when he will return.

He offers a parable: it's like a man leaving his house to some servants, giving each a task. Presumably, the tasks have to do with being good stewards of the master's household, not to stop work in order to speculate when the master will return.

What Jesus calls for is an attentiveness, a watchfulness that enables us to be ready for God's activity. It makes sense to me that if we hope to be ready for God's ultimate action, the Second Advent of the Son, the best preparation would be practicing attentiveness and responding to God's *daily* activity. In other words, to prepare for the Second Coming by making daily discernment of God's activity a part of our lifestyle. This is in fact what we've tried to do with our New Creation church design. Advent encourages all believers to be on guard and to renew their watchfulness—watchfulness that enhances, rather than detracts from the call to follow Christ daily.

Our Scripture passage comes from the last part of Mark 13. As a whole, this chapter of Mark addresses the End Times, a very hot topic in our day and age. My topic this morning is really the start of Advent, not the Second Coming as such, but verse 30 of our text calls for a couple of comments, since it figures prominently in a lot of Second Coming speculations.

Now, I believe that the Second Coming could happen at any time. But there is a school of prophecy advocates in the church that teaches that before Jesus returns, the faithful church will be "raptured" or snatched away, taken up directly to heaven and delivered from the Great Tribulation of the End Times. This is the *Late Great Planet Earth* scenario, most recently popularized in the *Left Behind* series. Personally, I would love this to be true, as I have no great desire to live through extremely difficult times myself. And as a young Christian, I believed this to be what the Bible teaches.

Today, however, I think that the advocates of this view impose too much on Scripture to make it work. Rather than let Scripture speak for itself, this view requires an artificial interpretive grid to hang together. I hasten to say that I don't think that one's salvation is dependent on your view of the Second Coming. But this is my pastoral concern: if you did get attached to this point of view, you may very well end up being less rather than more prepared for the events of the Last Days. If you are counting on escaping hard times, you are less likely to prepare for them, and you are more likely to abandon hope if hard times should come.

This is related to verse 30 of our reading, Jesus tells his disciples, *I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.* The question is, what generation was Jesus referring to? Bible

prophecy advocates typically say that *this generation* means *our* generation. (They link this in particular to the rebirth of Israel in 1948, but that's another story.)

The problem with taking *this generation* to mean us is that it is not the natural reading of the text. Jesus is speaking to his disciples with the destruction of Jerusalem approaching in their lifetimes. Why would he refer to a generation 2,000 years in the future? Nowhere else is this the meaning of "this generation."

The better answer to this problem, I believe, is to recognize that in Mark 13, the Gospel writer records Jesus' teachings about two related but different events. One is the destruction of Jerusalem, of which Jesus speaks at the very beginning of the chapter—*Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down* (13:2). The other event is the Last Days and the Second Coming.

*This generation*, does refer to the disciples' generation, but *all these things* concern the destruction of Jerusalem, which in fact occurred in 70 AD. This hadn't happened before Mark was written; Mark didn't have our perspective today, and to some degree, he permitted Jesus' words to be blended in a way that leaves questions hanging. But this doesn't hurt the teaching; in fact, in ways it dramatizes the warnings. The return of Jesus will be as unexpected and as devastating for the world as the fall of Jerusalem within a generation of Jesus' earthly ministry. We are all urged to be on guard and to be alert.

But perhaps the most important and practical reason for us to take Jesus' warning seriously is that for each of us, our "Last Day" can come at any time, without warning. Like the Rich Fool in Jesus' parable, it is not for us to say, "Self, eat, drink and be merry, for I have more than I need!" (Luke 12:16ff.) Our Advent attitude of watchfulness applies to the whole year. So let's return to today being the beginning of the Advent season.

I've been looking forward to this day because it marks the beginning of at least three things, all of which tie together. Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the season of preparation for Christmas. It took me awhile in my Christian walk to appreciate the richness of Advent, but as I have grown, so has my understanding and love for this season.

Another beginning that this day marks is the start of the new church year. New Year's isn't till January 1, and Chinese New Year is a bit after that, but the church year—appropriately—begins today with the first Sunday of Advent. Certainly the new church year gets swallowed up by our society's expectation of Christmas and the coming of the new calendar year, but to me, appreciating this season as the start of a new year has very rich meaning.

Both these beginnings—Advent and the new church year—are behind the new Discipleship Hour series that also begins (began) today: Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline—the Path to Spiritual Growth*. Advent is a time of spiritual renewal, a time for assessing, confessing, professing and sharing in the life of faith as a community of faith. It is a time for New Year's resolutions aimed at loving God more wholly, caring for one another more tangibly and following Jesus more faithfully.

That is why I am excited about the *Celebration of Discipline* series. It is ideally suited for Advent and the start of the new church year. And we are going to take our time. We are going to take six months to cover the series that normally would be done in half the time. That is because we are showing the video segment of the series one week, then offering another Sunday for small groups to meet to discuss and share in the learning.

There are several levels of participation possible in this series. The first level is attending worship during this time. Pastor Brad and I will be preaching and making connections with the series. Because each session will take two Sundays, both he and I will have a chance to share on every topic. So if you just attend worship, you will be getting a taste of what *Celebration of Discipline* is about.

The second level of participation is the video presentation every other week. Richard Foster is the primary presenter in these clips, which run about 25 minutes each. Foster brings in some friends to also share, such as Dallas Willard. If you want, you are invited to come upstairs at 9 a.m. to watch the video every other week. At the end of the video segments, either Brad or I will be present to answer questions. You don't need to commit to a small group to be welcome to watch the videos.

Because this video series is based on Foster's book *Celebration of Discipline*, the third level of participating in this series is buying the book and reading it. You can do this on your own, or, better yet, you can read the book, watch the video, participate in worship, and also take part in a small group discussion on each topic. If you take part in a group, you will also have available a participant's guide in booklet form that summarizes each segment and offers daily devotional texts and questions for your own reflection.

This represents the fourth level of getting into this learning opportunity, and I invite you all to come check it out. The first video will be shown today at 9 in the Upper Social Hall.

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Richard Foster's introduction to *Celebration of Discipline* offers a healthy and encouraging framework for the hearing of our Scripture reading this morning.

Like the season of Lent that helps us prepare spiritually for Holy Week and Easter, Advent is a time to “get in shape” spiritually so that we might profit most from the blessing of Christmas. So like Lent, Advent traditionally is a time for prayer and reflection, devotions, fasting, Bible reading and spiritual focusing—all of which, you can see, are excellent practices for being on guard and being alert for the Second Coming.

But thoughts of the Second Coming often bring to mind the images of creepy and gloomy doomsayers carrying “The End Is Near” signs and wearing dark cloaks. We think of panic, of end-of-the-world scenarios. We might even be threatened with paralysis—an inability to do anything meaningful because we are, literally, scared stiff. But Jesus doesn’t say to us, “Freeze!” He says, “Watch!” And being spiritually alert and watchful is the essence of what the disciplines are all about.

If you take these dramatic words of Jesus and then listen to Richard Foster begin his video series with coffee cup in hand, speaking so warmly and personally, with no hint of hurry or worry, you might feel—as I do—that there is a sermon in just that contrast. His first message is that we are invited to practice the disciplines *not* in order to *change ourselves*, but in order to place us in a position where *God* can best transform us. (And that’s where we want to be—Rapture or no Rapture...)

This invitation is not to a system of rules and rigidity, but to a life of grace and freedom. The spiritual disciplines free us to walk in God’s ways in the midst of this frantic, scary world. They do not exempt us from suffering, necessarily, but they will help us hold fast to Christ, come what may. And that is the crucial call to the church to be watchful and faithful.

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

Brothers and sisters, let us welcome and embrace Advent as God’s gift to us.