

READY FOR THE END

Mark 13:24-37

Dean Nadasdy, one of the best preachers in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, tells the story about Carl Sandburg, the famous writer. Though Sandburg was well known poet, he also dedicated a big part of his life to writing the definitive biography of Abraham Lincoln. Sandburg lived in Chicago and used to take a walk each morning along the shores of Lake Michigan. His friends knew this and decided to play a practical joke on him. They hired an actor the dress up like Lincoln and walk from the opposite direction Sandburg was walking so they would pass right by each other. They placed themselves in a hidden location where they could see how Sandburg would react. What happened? Hold that thought and we'll get to it later.

This is the Last Sunday of the Church Year. Our lessons remind us to be ready for when our Lord Jesus returns. Isaiah said, "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But My salvation will last forever, My righteousness will never fail." Jude said, "Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal love." Jesus in our Gospel said. "Be alert! You do not know when the time will come." What will it be like when we meet Him?

Think of what it was like to go on our first date. We thought, "How do I look? What should I say? What will she/he think of me?" Or think of the questions we ask before a job interview. "Will I answer the questions correctly? Will I look competent or like a babbling fool?" Or what will it be like when we meet people we haven't seen in years at a class reunion? If we are concerned about those meetings, what will it be like when we meet Jesus?

The New Testament puts a lot of emphasis on the second coming of Jesus. We read a New Testament writer like St. Paul and it sounds like he was expecting Jesus to return in his lifetime. But 2,000 years have come since that time and Jesus

hasn't come back. So why should we be concerned about Jesus coming again?

John Beckett is a Christian manufacturing executive near Cleveland whose business was featured on ABC News. Though his business is successful financially, it runs on Christian principles of emphasizing honesty, concern for workers and their families, and responsibility to the community. Beckett started alongside his company an agency called "Advent Industries" which offers job training for those who are hard to employ. When asked how he has been able to succeed in business, he replied, "Business direction." Beckett's idea of a business direction is not about dollars and cents or profits and losses, but having a reason for being in business.

To illustrate this Beckett goes back to the Bible and looks at those who lacked direction, like Esau, Saul, and Judas Iscariot. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. He put his immediate desires in front of what really mattered. Saul lost his vision to lead as king of Israel by doing whatever made other people happy or satisfied his own needs rather than trusting in God. Judas sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

What about us? Are we living our lives for a bowl of soup or 30 pieces of silver? Is the desire for a new car or a bigger house or a more comfortable retirement the main direction in our lives?

Beckett also lists some in the Bible who did have direction—Abraham, Nehemiah, and Jesus. Abraham saw the vision to move to a new land and trust in God's promise that his descendants would be as many as the stars and inhabit that land. Nehemiah looked to God's promise to restore Jerusalem after the exile in Babylon. That gave him the courage to rebuild the walls of that city despite opposition. Jesus saw the vision of the cross and the tomb that would lead to our salvation. All of them moved in the direction God led them.

God has given us direction as well. That is what Jesus' second coming means to us. When a runner begins a race, he is leaning into the starting

line, ready to move in the direction the race is going. Planes were built with wings leaning up on the outside from the fuselage. This gave the planes stability in flight. But during World War II engineers learned that if you straighten the wings, the plane may be less stable to stay in a level flight, but it would turn and maneuver more quickly. Warplanes were built not to stay in a steady, level flight, but to move and turn around suddenly.

Knowing that Jesus will come again puts us on the “starting line.” It “tips our wings down.” It keeps us from being settled and satisfied with this life. We are being moved “off center” as we anticipate Jesus coming again so that instead of trusting in what we can get or do in this life, we trust in the God who gives to us eternal life.

Jesus illustrates this in Mark with the example of man who leaves his house and property in the care of his servants. Since they know he is coming back, the servants will remember that the house belongs to him. Since we know Jesus is coming back, we remember that everything we have, including ourselves, belongs to Him. So we want to take care of what He has given us according to what He says, not our own selfish desires.

This week the Christmas shopping season goes into full swing, though today with internet shopping many have been shopping for months for Christmas. As we think about what to give to the people we love, one example of taking care of what God has given us is alternate gift giving. Instead of wondering what to get for people “who seem to have all they need,” we can give gifts to the needy in honor of those we love. We can give to all kinds of mission projects here at church or to many groups right here in our community to help the poor and homeless.

But will we be ready when He meets us? Will He see us ready or ill-prepared? Will we be good enough?

Let’s go back to the story of Carl Sandberg on the shores of Lake Michigan. His friends waited as the actor dressed like Lincoln came near to him. How would he react? Sandberg recognized the tall man approaching him with the top hat and beard. Sandburg walked right up to him and without missing a beat, tipped his hat and said, “Good

morning, Mr. President,” and then continued on his way.

When you are familiar with someone, you act naturally with that person. Yes, Jesus is coming again to end the world. But He comes to us daily. He invites us to walk with Him as we read His Word. He invites us to partake of His body and blood in Holy Communion. He urges us to begin each day remembering our Baptisms when His love splashed all over us. And He comes to us to laugh with us, cry with us, embrace us, and listen to us through the Christian people He puts into our lives. And when we meet Him on that last day, we can say naturally, “Good morning, Lord.”

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
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