

## Mark 13:32-37

<sup>32</sup> "But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. <sup>36</sup> May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. <sup>37</sup> What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"



*Christ taking leave of the Apostles, Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1381 | Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena | Public Domain US*

## Welcome to Advent

In Liturgical Year B, this reading from the Gospel according to Mark becomes a signpost to the Advent Season in its use on the first Sunday of Advent, the liturgical season that precedes and prepares for Christmas. It is a season of hope and of longing, of joyful expectation and of peaceful preparation. It is good to remember that Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation for the coming of Jesus Christ, both in his historical incarnation as a baby in Bethlehem and his future return in glory at the end of time. The readings during this season are meant to evoke a sense of longing, repentance, and vigilance - not just for Christmas but also for the destiny of Christian life.

Many Christians may not realize that the readings for the four Sundays of Advent also follow a regular pattern each Sunday has its own special readings and characteristics:

**First Sunday of Advent** - The readings look forward to the "End Times" and the coming of the "Day of the Lord" or the "Messianic Age"; the Gospel is an excerpt from the Apocalyptic Discourse of Jesus in one of the Synoptic Gospels. The dark tone serves as a reminder of the need for repentance and renewal, calling on believers to examine their lives and turn away from sin in preparation for Christ's coming. The reflective and penitential aspect of Advent is captured in the readings.

**Second Sunday of Advent** - The Gospel readings focus on the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist as the precursor or forerunner of Jesus, the one who came to "Prepare the Way of the Lord," by calling the people to turn back to God. The readings often include passages from the Old Testament, particularly from the book of Isaiah, which contain prophecies about a voice crying out in the wilderness, making the paths straight for the Lord. These prophecies are associated with John the Baptist, and his role as the one who fulfills these prophecies is emphasized. Like Isaiah, John the Baptist's message was one of repentance and conversion, a fitting Advent theme.

**Third Sunday of Advent** - The Gospel readings continue to focus on John the Baptist, who talks about the one who is to come after him. The 3rd Sunday of Advent, often called Gaudete Sunday, is more joyful and celebratory compared to the previous weeks of Advent. "*Gaudete*" means "rejoice" in Latin, and it is a day of joyful anticipation. The readings often emphasize that the time of waiting is nearing its end, and the fulfillment of God's promises is drawing closer. It is a reminder of the joy that comes with the anticipation of Christ's arrival. The Gospel reading shifts the focus from a solely penitential and preparatory tone to one of joy and hope. It encourages believers to rejoice in the Lord's coming and to maintain a sense of hope and expectation.

**Fourth Sunday of Advent** - The Gospels tell of the events that preceded and prepared for the birth of Jesus, including the dreams of Joseph (Year A), the Annunciation (Year B), and the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Year C). By using different Gospel passages, the lectionary provides a more complete narrative of the events surrounding Jesus' birth. It allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the angelic announcements, the experiences of Mary and Joseph, the visitation of the shepherds, and the journey of the Magi, which may not all be found in a single Gospel. One year focuses on the Annunciation to Mary and highlights the importance of her role in the incarnation, while another reading may emphasize the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the fulfillment in Christ.

**How long is Advent?** Many people think that there are always four weeks of Advent. Well, only in some years does the liturgical Season of Advent last four full weeks. In most years, Advent is a little shorter, depending on which day of the week Christmas/December 25 happens to be that year. The more precise answer to the question is that there are always four Sundays of Advent, but that the Season of Advent can be between three and four weeks long. In 2023, the Season of Advent is as short as it can be: 22 days, starting on Dec 3rd

### **From Matthew to Mark**

In the movement from the readings at the end of Lectionary Cycle A (Matthew) to the Markan Advent readings in Cycle B, it is noteworthy that the "end time" tone of the readings continue. The final course of Matthean Sunday gospels have the themes of vigilance, preparation, and the coming judgment.

- 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday: The Wise and Foolish Maidens (Mt 25:1-13)
- 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday: The Parable of the Talents (25:14-30)
- Christ the King: The Great Judgment (25:31-46)

Our Markan Advent gospel reading is the final verses of the larger "Olivet Discourse" in Mark 13:1-37. It is a passage that has many challenging features for Markan scholars in the form and content of the chapter and its relationship to the whole of Mark's Gospel. Unlike the rest of Mark, the Olivet discourse is rather lengthy. It is the longest uninterrupted discourse recorded by Mark and the only time Mark records Jesus' words at length.

The Olivet discourse provides the bridge between Jesus' public ministry, culminating in the conflict with the Temple authorities (Chs. 11:11–12:12), and the Passion Narrative (Ch. 14). The prediction of

the Temple destruction is in the discourse and appears again in the context of Jesus' trial and execution, thereby connecting judgment upon Jerusalem implied in the discourse and the death of Jesus. But at its core, the discourse is a farewell address and exhortation concerning the conduct of the disciples in the period when Jesus will no longer be with them.

While many include Mark 13 as part of an end-time puzzle to be unraveled, the purpose of Mark 13 is not to provide secreted information to the insightful but to promote faith and obedience in a time of distress and upheaval. Jesus was preparing the disciples and the Church for a future period in which persecution and mission would be the norm. This chapter echoes Mark 8:31 and the verses that follow: *"He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days."* As Mark 8 continues Jesus addresses the conditions and mission of discipleship.

Most scholars agree that Mark was written for the Christians of Rome, harassed by persecution and disturbed by the rumors of the developments in Palestine in the decade before the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The inclusion of the endtimes discourse in the Gospel was motivated by the same pastoral concern that had prompted Jesus' teaching. Mark cautions his readers that the community is to find its authentic discipleship not in apocalyptic fervor but in obedience to Jesus' call to cross-bearing and evangelism in the confidence that this is the will of God which must be fulfilled before the parousia ("2nd coming"). Jesus' words provided a bed-rock for Christian hope that looks through the current persecution (for Jesus in his time and the Romans 30 years later) but also looks forward to the triumphant Son of Man whose appearance represents the one event in light of which the present is illumined. It is on this promise that Mark encourages the Romans to face the crisis of the sixties with realism and hope.

William Lane outlines Mark 13 as follows:

- Jesus' Prophecy of Impending Destruction. Ch. 13:1–4
- Warning Against Deception. Ch. 13:5–8
- A Call to Steadfastness Under Persecution. Ch. 13:9–13
- The Appalling Sacrilege and the Necessity for Flight. Ch. 13:14–23
- The Triumph of the Son of Man. Ch. 13:24–27
- The Lesson of the Fig Tree. Ch. 13:28–31
- **The Call to Vigilance.** Ch. 13:30–37 ~ *the 1st Advent Sunday Gospel begins at v.32*

## Commentary

This gospel reading begins with *"But of that day or hour..."* clearly referencing something already mentioned. Our Sunday passage does not include the first two verses of what scholars hold should be part of the pericope (*narrative*) of the passage

*"<sup>30</sup> Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>32</sup> But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."*  
(Mark 13:30–32)

The referent of *"that day or hour"* is when Heaven and earth will pass away, presumably in the shaking of all things, which is to introduce the second coming. The expression *"that day"* is frequently found in OT passages announcing the day of God's appearance (e.g. in Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Joel, and Zechariah). Here it designates an indeterminate date which remains the Father's secret. Many hear an echo of Isaiah 34:4: *"...The heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll, and all their host shall wither*

away, *As the leaf wilts on the vine, or as the fig withers on the tree*" - recalling the "Lesson of Fig Tree" from Mark 13:28-31.

While the expression "*pass away*" would naturally bring to mind an apocalyptic moment, the emphasis here, however, is not on the apocalyptic prediction, but on the permanence of Christ's words. This is also a thought of Isaiah, which Mark equates with the words of Yahweh in the Old Testament: "*Though the grass withers and the flower wilts, the word of our God stands forever.*" (Isaiah 40:8)

Lutheran Pastor Brian Stoffregen notes that hundreds of generations have passed away and Jesus has not yet returned. Some maintain that Jesus made a mistake, but Jesus also indicates that he has no idea when the end will come. The first generation of Christians expected Jesus' return in their lifetimes. Paul did (1Th 4:15). This expectation would have been even more important to Mark's readers, for his narrative ends with Jesus being absent – there is only a promise that they will see him back in Galilee.

R.T. France argues that Jesus' words need to be taken at their face value as a prediction of the destruction of the temple within that generation. In contrast to France, another approach to these verses is to note that every other time that Jesus uses the word "generation" (*genea*) in Mark, it refers to "*unbelieving, adulterous and sinful people*" (8:12, 38; 9:19). So, it could be that Jesus is saying that we will never be rid of unbelieving, adulterous and sinful people until that day when Jesus brings in the new heaven and new earth. No matter how hard we try to convert all the peoples of the world - and that is part of our calling while waiting - there will always be those people who will not believe -- people whose lives bring pain and destruction to others. Perhaps similarly, there may be no hope of living in a world this side of the Parousia where there will not be wars and rumors of wars; nations rising up against nations; earthquakes and famines (13:7-8).

Stoffregen notes that all this leads him to think about those who are so concerned about this earth, e.g., the pollution problem; or fantasizing about life in heaven without having their life centered in the Word, are dreaming about temporary things. "There is a person I know who is great at arguing against using paper and plastic products or the wrong kinds of soap, etc. in order to protect our environment (and I think such concerns are good), but she doesn't come to any Bible Studies. She doesn't attend adult Sunday school classes. It would seem that she is making some important secondary concerns primary, rather than centering on the one thing that will last."

Jesus concluded his response by stressing the responsibility of maintaining vigilance. The duty to watch draws its force from the fact that "*no one knows*" the critical moment of God's decisive intervention. Perhaps one is surprised that the lack of knowledge includes "*nor the Son.*" Early on the clause "*nor the Son*" attracted the attention of theologians anxious to trace the christological implications in the confession of ignorance, but that inquiry misses the point. The inclusion is accidental with respect to Jesus' intention. His purpose was not to define the limits of his knowledge, but to indicate that vigilance, not calculation, is required. If the Son of Man and the angels are ignorant of "*that day*" it is because nothing allows a presentiment of its coming. Its approach is impossible to discern and so to prepare oneself for it. In this respect it stands in sharp contrast to the destruction of Jerusalem, which could be clearly foreseen and its devastation avoided by flight. The day of judgment will arrive so suddenly and unexpectedly that absolutely no one will have the least warning. That is why vigilance and confident faith are required of the disciples and the Church. Correctly understood, the qualification "*nor the Son*" indicates that even Jesus had to live by faith and to make obedience and watchfulness the hallmark of his ministry.

The determination of the critical moment of intervention rests exclusively with "*the Father.*" On this point the Father has not delegated his authority to anyone, not even to the Son. The one certainty the

disciples may have is that the day will come when God will execute his decision to judge the world, and for that purpose he will send forth his Son with the hosts of angels (an image in both Mark 8:38 and 13:26.). The parousia and the judgment it will inaugurate are matters irrevocably decided. From this perspective the parousia is not conditioned by any other consideration than the sovereign decision of the Father, which remains surrounded with impenetrable mystery.

There is a lot carried in these two verses which precede our Advent Gospel that lead to the exhortations that follow: <sup>32</sup> *“But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* <sup>33</sup> *Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.*

The exhortations to vigilance are tied to the unknowability of the timing of the Father’s critical intervention. The connection with this mystery is underlined by reference to an ignorance of God’s secret counsel:

v. 32 *“No one knows that day or that hour ...”*

v. 33 *“You do not know when the time will come.”*

v. 35 *“you do not know when the lord of the house is coming.”*

In the parallelism that is developed, “that day or that hour,” “the critical moment,” and the moment of the householder’s return are identical expressions for the same reality: the mysterious moment of divine intervention, which cannot be foreseen. Because the moment of crisis is unknowable, unceasing vigilance is imperative.

### **The Parable of the Absent Master**

<sup>34</sup> *It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.* <sup>35</sup> *Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.* <sup>36</sup> *May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.* <sup>37</sup> *What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”*

All this is illustrated by the parable of the absent master of the house. A journeying master delegated authority to his servants and assigned each to his work, specifying that the doorkeeper is to watch. The true servant will want to be actively engaged in his Master’s service when he returns. The idea of “return” clearly ties in with the looming parousia and “that day.” The danger is that the master returns suddenly and finds the servant sleeping (v. 36).

It is interesting to note that rather than using the Jewish practice of dividing the night into three watches, Mark uses the Roman practice of four night-watches: *evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.*

At this point it is good to recall that this entire dialogue, which began in Mark 13:3, began as a question asked privately by Peter, James, John and Andrew, the disciples, to whom he delegated his authority (cf. Mark 6:7; the mission of the 12). But here Jesus’ remarks are addressed to apostles and disciples alike. It is an explicit extension of the exhortation to watch to a wider circle, which Mark undoubtedly understood to include the Christians of Rome. This suggests that it was Jesus’ intention to transcend any distinction between the disciples, to whom he delegated his authority (see on Ch. 6:7), and the Church at large. That which is primarily the duty of the disciple is also the responsibility of the entire community. Each member has “his work” and by completing it he fulfills the obligation to watch. Vigilance is the responsibility of every believer and provides the sole guarantee of preparedness for the Lord’s return.

*“What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”*

The stress upon vigilance sustained throughout the discourse suggests that the final call to watchfulness in verse 37 is not focused exclusively upon the last day, but like the previous admonitions, has bearing upon the continuing life of the Church during an age marked by false teachers, persecution and delay in the Lord's return. But the focus is not exclusively external to the Church. When our reading is seen in the context of the entire discourse, it is evident that the vigilance of the Church includes perils from within as well as from outside as noted in Mark 13:5–23. The time of the appearance of the Son of Man in glory is unknown, but the fact that he will come is certain. The Church is called to live vigilantly in the certainty of that coming.

### **A Final Thought**

The biblical scholar Pheme Perkins offers us a final thought [*Mark*, 694-5]:

“On the one hand, Mark underscores the certainty of Jesus’ word. Readers know that the death of Jesus on the cross does not end the story of salvation. On the other hand, Christians need not concern themselves with apocalyptic speculation. Disciples should remember that ‘doing the will of God’ (3:35) has no relationship to the timing of divine judgment. Neither should Christians concern themselves with the fate of those who persecute them or who reject the gospel. When Christians rush to judge others, they should remember this exhortation. The only question the master will ask is whether the servants have been faithful to their call as disciples.

“Living some two millennia after these words were spoken, many Christians today assume that the word about watchfulness has no significance for them. Yet we all know that human life is fleeting. A young man was murdered on the streets of a large city merely for asking some youths why they were verbally tormenting an elderly man. The young man’s fiancée discovers that her whole world has dissolved. Fortunately, the last words they had exchanged concerned love and their hopes for the future. A young woman went to pick up her infant from his nap and discovered that he had died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Unfortunately, her last interaction with the baby had been one of anger and frustration over the child’s fussing and crying. Both women are in terrible pain. They have been stripped of what they love most in the whole world. But the young mother has to face the nagging regret that she did not show her baby the love she feels for him in the last hours she spent with him. On a personal level, such stories remind us that we should be watchful as Christians. The early religious orders practiced a time of examining one’s conscience, in which all members assessed how their behavior of the day just past reflected (or neglected) the conduct expected of members of their order. Being a faithful Christian does not just ‘happen’ like crabgrass or dandelions popping up in the lawn. It requires the care, attention, and cultivation of an expert gardener.”

### **A final bit of humor about remaining vigilant**

A young girl asked her Sunday school teacher, “What’s a lert?”

“A what?” the teacher asked.

“A lert?” she said again.

“Why do you want to know?” asked the bewildered teacher.

“Because the pastor said that we should ‘be alert,’ so I want to know what a lert is, so I can be one.”

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## Scripture

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