

Ready or Not

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Mark 13:32-37

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

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“**R**eady or Not” wasn’t my original title for this sermon. The initial title was “Apocalypse Now.” But given last Sunday’s sermon and today’s feature in the Washington Post, I feared you might misinterpret “Apocalypse Now” as my commentary on the challenges facing our church.

Actually, I’m hopeful. God wants to redeem everyone! Redeeming people is messy business, but surely God is up to the challenge.

The headline on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine, “Apocalypse Now,” is uncanny. It is accompanied with the words “Tsunamis, Earthquakes, Nuclear Melt-downs, Revolutions and Economies on the Brink. What the #@%! is next?” Media and Christians alike are wondering if we are living in the last days.

Mark 13 is a chapter devoted to apocalyptic events. Jesus speaks of the last days in terms of “wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines” (13:7-8). Biblical scholars have dubbed Mark 13 as “The Little Apocalypse” alongside “The Great Apocalypse” in the book of Revelation. Apocalypse is a word meaning revelation or

unveiling. Jesus lifts the veil on his coming in Mark 13.

One Biblical commentator writes, “Mark 13 has been a happy hunting ground for Christians who have tried to pinpoint the date of Christ’s return.” Church history is replete with end-time prognosticators who use Mark 13 as an almanac or time line to chart the end of the world.

I was driving behind an SUV on the beltway last week with May 21, 2011 scrawled across its back window. A Christian radio broadcaster, Harold Camping, claims Jesus will rapture his church on May 21, 2011. This rapture will be followed by six months of turmoil on earth until the world ends on October 21, 2011. This is not the first time Camping has predicted the end of the world. He originally set a date of 1994 for Christ’s return but later discovered a mathematical error and pegged this new date in May.

There are two equal and opposite errors we can make regarding Jesus’ coming. The first mistake is to take an excessive and unhealthy interest in eschatology. Some people insist on forcing this highly symbolic Biblical language to fit our present circumstances. The second mis-

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take is to disregard Christ's return altogether. For many secular people, Jesus' words about his return are greeted with cynicism and amusement.

In 1541, Michelangelo painted this massive fresco behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel to depict Jesus' coming in Mark 13. It took Michelangelo four years to complete this painting. It's a busy painting; there are 400 figures in all. Jesus is featured in the center, exercising his role in judging the living and the dead. Some in the painting are being transported to heaven while others are being confined to hell.

Such scenes symbolized in Mark 13 strike fear in the hearts of many Christians. Fear is not the primary emotion Jesus seeks to evoke here. Jesus doesn't talk about his coming to freak Christians out! His apocalyptic language is meant to instill hope in his followers. Jesus wants his disciples to know, despite evidence to the contrary, that evil will not prevail. Christ will triumph.

Bernard Travaieille writes about his student days at Bethel Seminary. Since there was no gym on campus, he and his friends played basketball at a nearby public school. A frail, old custodian would wait until the seminarians finished playing. Invariably, he sat there reading his Bible. Bernie asked him one day what he was reading. "The book of Revelation," the man said.

Bernie seemed surprised since Revelation is difficult to understand. So Bernie asked, "The book of Revelation, do you understand it?"

"Oh yes," the custodian assured him, "I understand it."

"You understand the book of Revelation? What does it mean?"

The old custodian answered quietly, "It means Jesus is gonna win."

That's the best summary of Revelation I've ever heard. In the aftermath of all that has happened in this church, it's comforting to know that evil doesn't have the last word. Jesus is going to win. Christ seeks to redeem everything!

Jesus makes three points about his coming in Mark 13. First, Jesus states that he *is* coming. He says in verse 26, "They will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory." There are over 300 New Testament references that speak to Jesus' second coming. For every passage dealing with Christ's first coming, eight more address his second coming.

Second, Jesus' coming cannot be determined with any certainty. Notice what he says in verse 32: "But about the day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Jesus puts the kibosh on determining the precise date of his return. If the angels don't know and the Son doesn't

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know, what makes end-time prognosticators think they know? It's the height of spiritual arrogance for Christians to claim to know more than their Lord.

This passage provides ammunition for those who call Jesus' divinity into question. If Jesus is divine, how do we explain Jesus' words that the Son doesn't know the time of his coming? Why doesn't Jesus know such things?

Jesus doesn't cease to be divine when he becomes human. Rather, he chooses not to take full advantage of his divinity on earth. Jesus voluntarily lays aside his full rights of divinity to inhabit time and space. He accepts the limitation that he can no longer be two places at once. He also lays aside access to complete knowledge. Jesus accepts the natural limitations of knowledge that go with being human.

Third, since we cannot determine when Jesus will come, he calls us to be ready whenever he comes. Jesus says in verse 33, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." The imperative force of the verbs "beware" and "keep alert" are in present tense, so we are to keep on watching and being alert for Christ's return.

Jesus reaffirms his call to be ready for his coming in verse 35, "Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will

come....What I say to you I say to all: keep awake."

The Greek term for keep awake, *gregorio*, is where we derive our English name Gregory. It means to keep watchful or vigilant. Early popes and bishops took the name Gregory to highlight their role in watching over the people of God.

I was not a stellar high school student. I was bored with the tedium of daily assignments. I thrived in college. Being assigned a paper, mid-term and final suited me just fine. A few college professors, however, liked to give pop quizzes. This meant I couldn't slack off until the end of the semester. I had to come to class each day prepared.

"Be prepared" is the scout motto. Always Prepared (*Semper Paratus*) is in the motto of U.S. Coast Guard. It's also the directive Jesus gives to his disciples.

Vigilance, not calculation, is the order of the day. As Christians, we are to live in a constant state of readiness.

Any apparent delay in Jesus' coming is regarded in Scripture not as negligence, but as merciful on God's part. We read in 2nd Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow about his promise... but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."

On May 19, 1780, the sky over Hartford darkened ominously, so much so that

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some members of the Connecticut House of Representatives feared the end was at hand. Colonel Abraham Davenport, who served as the House Speaker, rose from his seat to say, "The day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought." Candles were brought until the sunlight returned later in the day.

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Today, we are recognizing young people who are receiving their first communion or who are being recognized at the Lord's Table for the first time. Jesus implores you in Mark 13 to keep alert to the things of God.

Will Jesus' words fall on deaf ears? Some of you are all about mastering a sport or musical instrument or excelling in school. These are worthy pursuits, to be sure. My concern is one of emphasis. Jesus asks you to keep alert to the things of God, in much the same way you would to anything of importance.

Maybe you come to church to think about God for an hour or so. By the time you are riding merrily home, you are consumed with other things. God recedes from view and life goes on as before, without God.

I'm urging you to keep alert to the things of God. We prac-

tice the disciplines of prayer, Scripture meditation and spiritual friendship in order to keep alert to the things of God.

People say I'll get serious about faith when I graduate from high school or college, when I marry and settle down, when my kids are grown or I retire. There's always some excuse why today is wasted in favor of tomorrow.

There is a fable about three apprentice demons who receive instruction by Satan on the practice of seducing people. The first demon says, "I'll tell them there is no God." Satan says, "That won't work. People already know there is a God." The second demon says, "I'll tell them there is no hell." Satan answers, "That's no use either. People already know there is judgment for sin." The third demon says, "I'll tell them there is a God and judgment for sin, but there is no hurry." "Excellent," the devil says, "that will ruin them by the thousands."

C. S. Lewis writes something similar in *The Screwtape Letters*. Uncle Screwtape, a senior devil, instructs a junior devil named Wormwood on the fine art of temptation. "Tell people that God is real. Tell them that they should have faith in him. Tell them that the gospel is true, that Jesus Christ died to save them from their sins. But tell them there is no hurry."