

Mark 13:24-37
Four Watches in the Night - 2020

A few years back, a Christian band called Newsong released a song that became a hit on Christian radio stations. They sang about a little school up in the hills of Kentucky Where special kids born with special needs Are sent to learn life's ABCs.

Now these children have a Christian teacher. She tells them about Jesus: How He loves them and cares for them. And she tells them that in the twinkling of an eye, He's coming back to get us And that he'll take us to a wonderful place, a place where the streets are paved with gold!

Now here's the chorus, and it's kind of cute:

*Finger tips and noses
Pressed to the windowpanes.
Longing eyes, expectant hearts for Him to come again
All they know is that they love Him so
And if He said He'd come, He's coming
And they can't keep their windows clean
For fingertips and noses.*

It's a simple, child's faith: *If He said He'd come, He's coming.* So the response is to drop everything and spend the day just staring out the window to see when he's coming. When will that be?

This morning's Gospel passage from Mark is part of a larger talk that Jesus gives. He was sitting up on the Mount of Olives looking down on Jerusalem. Four of his disciples were trying to get some inside information from him on the QT. When the end was coming?

Jesus tells them about the things will happen first: The destruction of the Temple. Wars. Earthquakes. Signs in the sky. And something called the abomination of desolation.

You ask the solid biblical scholars to decipher what Jesus was saying and they don't agree. They're all over the map about what it all means.

Take these words of Jesus, for example: *In those days the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven.* Are we to take his words literally? Or do we take them poetically like "all creation shouts your glory, Lord."

When Jesus says, "*He will gather his elect from the four winds.*" Who are the elect: Jews or Jesus' church?

When Jesus says: "*Truly this generation shall not pass away until all these things have taken place.*" Who is "this generation" that he's talking about?

We're left scratching our heads. A big problem is that so many people approach this text like those children in the song. They're looking for Jesus' return. What clues can we find in the text to pinpoint his ETA?

But these same biblical enthusiasts miss Jesus' crucial words. He tells them! *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* Well, what's the point then? What was Jesus trying to tell his disciples?.

Rabbi's of Jesus day would often offer a lesson in a two-parts. First there was the Mashal. The Mashal is the story or the parable. And then following the story would be the Nimshal.

The Nimshal is a brief sentence to explain the story and give its direction. We see an example of that two-part teaching at the end of our reading today when Jesus gives them the parable of doorkeeper. A lot of people just kind of gloss over it. But when they do, they miss the key to understanding what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples.

Here's a clue. He wasn't giving them timetables.

First Jesus gives the Mashal. He begins: *Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.* Beware. It's the Greek word *bleppo* which translates: *"Pay attention. You need to know this! Road hazard ahead!!"*

And then the second command: Keep Alert It's from the Greek word, *agropneo* Agropneo means "Watch! Be vigilant. Be faithful."

So now that he has their attention, he continues. He tells of a man who leaves on a journey. But first he gives everyone their jobs to do while he's gone. He also makes one servant a doorkeeper and commands him to keep watch. That's it for the story.

Now comes the nimshal, the direction of the story. Jesus says; *Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: watch!"*

Jesus methodically sets out four periods of time through the night when the doorkeeper must keep watch:

First the Evening Watch – from 6:00 – 9:00

Then the Midnight Watch – from 9:00 – Midnight

Then the Cockcrow Watch – from Midnight to 3:00

And then the Dawn Watch – from 3:00 – 6:00.

Those four periods correspond to the four watches of a Roman guard. Now why does he specify those periods? If you continue reading Mark, you will see that Mark structured Jesus' Passion around those four watches of the night. And, looking at what happened on those four watches on the night before Jesus was crucified, you will see

Jesus setting the example of Keeping Watch. You will also see the counter examples of those who did not Keep Watch that night.

We begin with the Evening Watch – 6- 9 Mark says:

“When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, ‘I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me – one who is eating with me.’”

It’s the night before his crucifixion. And during this watch, Jesus was hosting the Last Supper. During this first watch, Jesus paid attention and was vigilant by keeping faith to institute the Holy Communion.

But there was one during that watch who was not faithful to Keep Watch. It’s Judas. He loses faith. He leaves the fellowship And he goes out to betray Jesus.

Keep Watch. Stay in fellowship with the Lord’s Supper.

Next comes the Midnight Watch (9:00 pm - Midnight). Jesus is in Gethsemane now as he addresses the enormity of his task. It is during this watch that Jesus will be arrested and taken to the Sanhedrin.

God has set out his mission, his purpose before him. In just hours he will take on the sin of the world. He will undergo flogging and then crucifixion. Keeping Watch for Jesus means being faithful to take the cup that the Father has given him. Even though he doesn’t want to. He trusts. *“Father, not my will, but yours.”* But it’s also during this watch when the disciples and will not be faithful to Keep Watch. Jesus asked them to stay awake and pray. Instead, they fell asleep.

And when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, they will scatter for their lives.

We’ve now entered the third watch of the night: Cockcrow: Midnight - 3:00 am. In this watch the High Priest interrogates Jesus. The powerful Sanhedrin holds his life in their hands. His own turn against him for what? For being true to God. For pursuing his mission. For being the Messiah.

Jesus Keeps Watch by being faithful to proclaim his Messiahship, even in the face of his opposition. But it’s also the time when Peter fails to Keep Watch by denying his Lord three times.

Mark notes the time saying: *“Immediately, the cock crowed the third time.”*

The final watch is early morning, the Dawn Watch from 3:00 – 6:00. Mark writes: *“Early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.”*

Here Jesus confronts the secular authorities. Here he is falsely accused. Here he is pressured to justify himself, submitting to man's authority.

Jesus Keeps Watch by being faithful standing before the secular authorities. He refuses to buckle under to the pressure. It's also at this time when some of the people failed to Keep Watch by siding with the establishment shouting: "Give us Barabbas!"

Mark presents the long night that Jesus endured before his crucifixion. A night of testing for Jesus divided up into the four watches. Critical events occurred that would test his resolve. It would also test his disciples.

The Early Church would pick up on the comparison There would be moments of crises for them. There would be times when some would feel tempted to betray their fellow Christians like Judas did in the evening. Times when they might not keep the Lord's Supper.

Some would be tempted to sleep like the disciples did in the Garden, instead of being vigilant in pray. When the going would get tough, some would be tempted to deny their allegiance to Jesus as Peter did at cockcrow. And some would be tempted abandon Jesus and cave to the civil government as some did at dawn.

So now we return to Jesus nimshal, his point of the parable when he says: *Therefore, watch! Stay awake!*

Jesus' parable shows that "watching, "staying awake" is not a passive activity. It's very active, It's very purposeful, and it can be very taxing.

It's not unlike when my oldest brother, Curt, went to his high school prom. My parents sent him off in his tux with corsage in hand. And then they settled in to watch a little TV

At about 9:00, Dad goes to bed.

Mom says, "I'm going to stay up and watch a little longer."

At 10:00 Mom checks the time – no Curt.

A little agitated she decides it's time to do a little **ironing**

11:30 PM The news is over and no Curt.

Good time to scrub the **kitchen floor**

1:00 PM – Curt comes trundling in expecting a dark house with the parents fast asleep.

He was greeted by a very agitated mother. Mother had kept watch.

And as late as the hour was, she was not the least bit sleepy.

Keeping watch was **not a passive** thing for her. Keeping watch kept my mother very busy. Keeping watch kept her vigilant to stay awake until Curt returned home.

Jesus calls us to that kind of vigilance, the active keeping watch like he did. Being vigilant in the face of threats around him. Being faithful, even when others flagged in their faith

What about all the events that Jesus describes. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not give its light. The stars will be falling from heaven.

The message we take from that is the enormity of some spectacular events in the future. We can't fully comprehend them right now. Jesus' Passion night gives us a glimpse of the great and final event that will bring history to its conclusion.

When Jesus told the disciples to Keep Watch in the Garden while he prayed, they could never imagine what was coming. A man who days before was cheered into Jerusalem with palm branches, would be crucified the next day. Three days later he would rise from the dead. Unimaginable!

So too, we living today can't fully comprehend what is yet to come. But it will be cataclysmic. It will be unimaginable. That's the point.

Jesus doesn't give us a countdown timetable. Quite the contrary! Jesus message is: *"You can't know when the End is coming, so be "keeping watch" at all times."* Because those who don't will miss out.

I love the story that John van Deursen shared with me about his work for the State Department. As a Marine, John often served as a special agent to guard visiting dignitaries during their visit in the United States. When the Queen of England came to Manhattan for a shopping trip to Sacks Fifth Avenue, John reported for duty to the State Department's Agent in Charge in Manhattan .

Now this Agent in Charge had a little attitude. He told John that he wanted one of "his own best agents" in the chase car that followed immediately behind the Queen's limousine. So John would just have to ride with the NYPD in another car further back.

The entourage pulled up to Sacks and escorted the Queen into the store. The Special Agent in the chase car – "one of the best agents" - told John: *"She's going to be at least 45 minutes. Why don't we grab a cup of coffee down the street?"* John begged off and the Special Agent took off for his coffee.

Just fifteen minutes later the Queen emerged from Sacks with her entourage. The Special Agent was somewhere having coffee, but there was no time to go looking for him. Instead, John ordered his own car full of NYPD to fall in line behind the Queens' limo as the chase car.

You can imagine how the Special Agent felt when he returned to find everyone gone. He didn't know when the Queen would return. And he missed out by not keeping watch.

It's fun to speculate about biblical prophecy and future events. But Jesus doesn't call us to decipher clues and timetables. He calls us to keep watch like he did on the night before his crucifixion.

Keep Watch!

By guarding yourself against deception.

By being faithful in times of testing.

By standing firm against those who would throw you off track: the world, the flesh and the devil.

Jesus gives us prophecy not so that we can spend our lives with finger tips and noses pressed against the window pane looking of Jesus' return Just the opposite. He does it to fortify us with hope.

So that no matter what we might go through in this life, No matter what challenges we might face, No matter what disappointments we might meet, No matter what failures we suffer, it doesn't matter. We know how this story ends.

History is moving forward toward a final conclusion. This world is poised for a rendezvous with eternity. It will be spectacular, It will be unimaginable, And it is inevitable.

But between that time and now, there is the long night of waiting. A night that will test our faith and challenge our security. Like the long night of waiting that Jesus spent.

During that night of waiting, Jesus calls us to: Be vigilant. Be faithful. Stay awake. Watch.