

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Watchful and Alert”

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(Jesus said) “Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come” (Mk. 13:33).

Right outside my office window there’s an arborvitae tree. Birds often land on it, and sometimes from there, hop onto my windowsill to look for insects or seeds trapped in the screen. The birds are constantly checking out their surroundings for any danger. Never still, their heads are twitchy and listening attentively. They are jittery and fidgety and will fly away if I make the slightest move. They are so watchful and alert.

Many of you will soon be in the woods hunting. Being still and quiet, you’ll see much more wildlife than I’ll ever see, with two dogs crashing through the dry leaves in front me. Of course, you’ll see squirrels. . . lots and lots of squirrels. But also rabbits and turkeys and coyotes and cranes and just before sunset, maybe a nocturnal animal or two: raccoons, possums. They are all so vigilant and alert and watchful. In the days to come, when you see their vigilance, let it remind you of the vigilance we are to have as Christians.

“Be on your guard. Stay awake” Jesus said. “You do not know when the time will come.” He’s speaking, of course, of the end times and of His second coming. “It’s like a man going on a journey” he says. When he leaves home, he puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore, stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.” Four times, in just four verses, he says stay awake. He’s usually not so repetitive. It must be important. There must be a lot on the line.

Is his return imminent? I believe it is. All the signs are in place. Besides, our life spans are short. Job says our days pass by swifter than a weaver’s shuttle (7:6). We might see Him first with the trumpet blast and legions of angels, or maybe it will be when we quietly pass away of natural causes. Either way, we need to be ready. Either way, it’s going to happen, and sooner than we think. Therefore, be watchful and alert.

When He comes again in His glory, no one will be able to resist Him. Until that day, however, we can resist Him, defy Him, rebel against Him. Whenever He’s working through His humble means of grace, He is resistible. We can reject Him by rejecting our baptisms. We can despise Him by despising preaching and His Word. We can decline Him by declining His Supper. Whenever He’s working through the humble means of grace, we *can* resist Him. He gives us that freedom. But when He comes again in power, there will be no resisting Him.

In Revelation 3, Jesus says He stands at the door and knocks. More often than not, today, He is ignored. Sometimes He’s even told to buzz off. And He respects us enough to do just that. He’s not going to bust down the doors and force His way in. After all, what kind of God would He be if He didn’t allow us to reject Him? He’d be a tyrant or a dictator, or some sort of monster. But that’s not the kind of God we have. He allows us to reject Him.

If someone despised you and rejected you, would you invite that one to live with you in your house forever. Would you urge him, force him to live with you and your children? Or, would you let him go on his way?

Usually, we think God sends people to hell. It would be far more accurate to say that hell is first and foremost a choice made by people. These are people who don’t want to be bothered by God and His church, or people who don’t think they need God. They just want to be left alone. And so, God gives them what they want. There’s nothing unfair or unjust about it. It’s just giving people what they’ve been demanding all along. They don’t want to be pestered by God, and hell is the one place where no one will ever more be pestered by God. Therefore C.S. Lewis said hell is “the greatest monument to human freedom.”

I'm told many younger men and women feel that coming into a church sanctuary such as this one can be intimidating. It may be because they don't know the liturgy or the hymns, what to say, when to stand. It may be because they don't want to feel judged by people. It may be because they don't want to feel judged by God. It's intimidating.

With the best of intentions, then, some churches are trying to bring God's Word to people in less threatening venues. They'll meet in cafes or microbreweries for theological discussions. Or they'll have the worship service in the church gymnasium, so it feels less formal, less intimidating. There's value in that, getting God's Word outside the church sanctuary.

Sooner or later, however, our paths are going to intersect with holy and almighty God. Sooner or later, we're going to be standing before Him, as our judge, and it's going to be intimidating. There's no avoiding it. Jesus is going to return with all power and might. No longer will He be someone you can avoid or ignore. No longer will He be someone you can spit on and torture and nail to a cross. No longer will He be someone you can worship **if** you have the time or **if** you don't have anything else going on that weekend. When He returns, He's coming with all the power in heaven and on earth. He's coming with the trumpet blast, and the holy angels to do His bidding. He's coming to gather all people from the ends of the earth, and will separate the goats from the sheep, and to those who have despised and rejected Him He will say, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." His words, not mine.

It seems to me, then, if we're going to brush up against holy and almighty God, the very best place to do that, is right here at the altar, receiving His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. It's right here, where the Gospel is preached, and where you are assured that, in spite of your sin, God still loves you in Christ, still forgives you, still has good plans for you, and has, in fact, chosen to remember your sin no more. It's right here, in sight of a baptismal font where God washed you and adopted you and made you His child. I don't want to bump into holy God apart from where he promises to be gracious, in these humble means of grace, in the Word and Sacraments.

Finally, please remember what God has done to save us from eternal death. Please remember how He walked the road to Jerusalem, knowing full well the torture and cruel death awaiting Him there. Remember how He cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Remember, there was no answer from the Father, right? The voice from above did not ring out with the words, "This is my beloved Son." Instead, there was only silence from the Father. Remember, hell is the one place where the Father will not pester a person . . . the one place where a man can cry out to God, but God is no longer listening. Out of love for you, Jesus suffered that hell for you. He suffered total abandonment for you. He suffered with your sin on His back. He forgives you and has redeemed you. He has baptized you as His child. And He's about to give you His body to eat and His blood to drink, to forgive and assure you that peace with God once more is made.

So, in the days ahead, whatever days He gives, whether their number is great or small, stay awake. Let him feed you **often** with His Word and Sacrament. Be alert. Be watchful. For Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Amen.