

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Gospel Lesson, from Mark Chapter 13. Jesus says this:

³⁵Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: ³⁶Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. ³⁷And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.(Mark 13:35-36, KJV)

With these words, our Saviour urges us to cherish the time granted to us. Like the good, old Choptank River of my childhood, flowing along in its lazy way, so our days can pass languidly onward, without us paying them much mind and without making much of them. It is as if we assume we will have an endless supply of days and years, and that we can put off piety and goodness till later. But then, Jesus does not say to us, "Put off till later," but rather, "Watch. Even today, watch." Treasure these days and count them worthy of being the day when you shall stand before Jesus, when I will stand before him.

In my pastor's study, I have printed up and affixed to my bookshelf a saying from St. John Chrysostom. It hangs right across from my computer monitor, and so when I lift my eyes and gaze about, my eyes so very often fall upon these words:

For God will say also to us, "I gave you *time* to learn this art of piety, wherefore have ye foolishly and uselessly wasted that time?"¹

None of us knows how much time remains to us. The Bible speaks of seventy years as being about the normal span of a human life. And so, in Psalm Ninety we read these words:

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.(Psalm 90:10, KJV)

Well, by God's grace, our days are often better than that — better than simply "labour and sorrow." Indeed, I hope that this is a very happy time in your life. And yet for each of us, there will come a time when our days are finished and we "fly off." There will come a time when the days entrusted to us have run their course, and we will see Christ. In terms of our individual lives, we might see Jesus err long, because for all we know our time might be nearing its end, perhaps because of old age or illness or sudden accident. And in larger terms -- indeed terms so large as to take in all the world -- there is the reality that Jesus is coming to earth again, in beauty and power. He is coming again, none of us knows when that will be, but Jesus asks us to watch for it and to be ready.

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. John*, NPNF, Vol. 14, page 211

My goal in this sermon is to so praise Jesus that we will not regret the reality that it is *with him* that we have to deal, both at the end of time and now, even today, if you should feel him calling to you to come walk with him. Have we “foolishly and uselessly wasted our time”? Never, if we have lived for him! Never! And time’s a’wastin’ for the task. It is high time that we draw near to Jesus, lest our days slip by much poorer than our Maker intended.

To this end of praising Jesus so that we will not regret the last day, nor our eternal encounter with him, let me try to deal with three points: (1) Who is well prepared for the last day? (2) Why should it cheer us up that we shall one day see Jesus face to face? And (3) How can a practical man, a practical woman, a practical boy, a practical girl, be ready for Jesus? In this third point I try to reckon with the reality that few of us are saints. Many of us are like Martha, the patron saint of practical matters. You remember her, I am sure. While her more spiritual sister, Mary, sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to his Word, Martha labored on with the housework and was “cumbered about with much serving.”(Luke 10:40, KJV) Jesus defends Mary, yes, but also he loves Martha and does not condemn her, though her thoughts seem not to be on spiritual matters.

So, to the first point: Who is well prepared to see Jesus? I begin with a wonderful passage in Martin Luther:

No one is rightly prepared for the last day except the one who desires / to be free from sin. If that is your desire, why are you afraid? For on this account you are in agreement with it. It comes in order to set free from their sins all who desire it, and you too long to be thus free. Give thanks to God and continue in this opinion. Christ says that his coming is your redemption.²

To me, this is one of the healthiest views of heaven that I can imagine. Who is well-prepared to stand before Jesus? The one who would be glad to be done with sin. All the folk talk of heaven’s clouds and harps and peeled grapes and so forth – none of this goes to the heart of the matter. It does not even seem particularly noble that we should desire such things. It sounds rather lazy to me. Surely we were created for a higher purpose than that we should lounge around through all eternity.

No, I am convinced that Luther is right: the one who is well-prepared for the last day is the one who desires to be free from sin. We honor Jesus because he frees us from our sins — not simply from the penalty of our sins, but more profoundly, from our sins themselves. There is no point in coming to Jesus unless you would take leave of your sins, for his path is set toward holiness of life, and to follow him is to forsake your sins. It is to walk away from them and to leave them behind.

Would you not forsake sin? Do you not desire to be free of it? It is sometimes hard to do so, I know. It can leave you with an immense sadness, as if you will never be happy again if this particular sin is not part of your future. Nonetheless, if you had the choice, would you not forsake the sin? Would you not accept the sadness for the sake of being done with sin? I believe you would, for you see, sin is itself a suffering. It is suffering for you and it is often suffering for others. What good does fury do, for example? It leaves you so regretful afterwards and inflicts harm to others along the way. If you had to become a new person — the kind of person that in the days of your wrath you would have considered a milk toast kind of guy — would you not choose to become such a

² Martin Luther, *Day by Day We Magnify Thee – Revised Edition*, 2008, from the reading for Thursday of the Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, based on Matthew 24:42.

person nonetheless? I think you would, and I think that in the long run, you would be awfully glad you made that choice.

Likewise with coveting. You live in a world that is very clever in creating desires within you. Advertising, publicity, internet and cell phones, the power of popular culture — all these things are hard at work planting desires in your heart. And sometimes those desires become either too strong or they are for unworthy objects. Then it is time to be done with your coveting. What good is it? It leaves you so very restless and tempts you toward exhaustion and unnecessary accumulation. Would it not be better to seek simplicity and charity? Do you not desire to be free of sin? It would be a better way of life for you and for your neighbors.

And so, I think Luther is right: Do not fear the Last Day and your encounter with Christ if you would love to be free of sin. For that is what he shall make of you: someone who enjoys the blessed liberty of sinlessness.

I move on to my second point: It is not to be regretted that one day we will see Jesus face to face, because Jesus is the best person you will ever know. This one who asks you to be ready for him is one who loves you now and will continue to do so with ever more earnestness.

To develop this point, I want to refer briefly to our Old Testament reading for today. It is from the Sixty-fourth Chapter of Isaiah.

Sunday by Sunday we begin our worship here at Immanuel in the name of the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And soon afterwards we fall upon our knees and confess our sins, yea, that we have not loved our Lord “with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” But as honest and as soul-searching as this weekly confession is, it is not quite so devastating as the confession we hear in today’s First Lesson, from Isaiah 64. Let me lift up some of the key phrases from this confession:

...in our sins we have been a long time... ⁶We have all become...unclean...polluted...We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷There is no one that calls upon thy name, that bestirs himself to take hold of thee...(Isaiah 64:5-7, RSV)

It’s an overwhelming confession. And yet hear the great cry of faith that immediately follows it.³ It is a cry that turns the eye away from Israel’s failures to the goodness of the Lord. The discouraged people raise their eyes and speak of God as their Father:

⁸Yet, O LORD, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand. ⁹Be not exceedingly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity for ever. Behold, consider, we are all *thy* people.

Now, here is why I praise Jesus and commend him to you: In the wee hours or in some quiet moment, you might find yourself echoing Israel’s ancient confession. You might find yourself admitting - I might find myself admitting - that heretofore, we have disappointed ourselves, our parents, our beloved, even reality itself. I hope not, but it might be true nonetheless that we sense that we have been a heartbreak to our Maker, so far. There stood the poor before us, but we neglected them. There stood the hungry, but we fed them not. There stood the lonely and the rejected, and we too rejected them.

³ A point made by Dennis T. Olson, in *The Lectionary Commentary: The First Readings*, page 398

As God had done for all of humanity, so he had done for us too⁴: He had placed in our very souls the desire for virtue, for neighborliness, for truthfulness, for love. But too often in our past, we did not heed the call. We have not yet found our path, and in the process, we have wasted, wasted too much time, failed to do the good we could have done and did the harm along the way that we should not have done.

Ancient Israel knew all about these things: all her disobedience, all her wasting of her time, all her falling short of the glory of God. And yet her dealings with the Lord over the centuries had instilled hope of forgiveness in her. And so, even in the depths of earnest confession, when she could see little good in *herself*, she still believed that there was good *in the Lord*, and so her heart was able to formulate that one precious word “Father”:

⁸Yet, O LORD, thou art our Father...(Isaiah 64:8, KJV)

And a good Father does not give up on his children, not even his wayward children.

So, when the Final Day comes and Jesus returns in power and beauty, the One returning is the very incarnation of this divine Love that will not let us go. The One returning is the one who says to the adulterer:

Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.(John 8:11, KJV)

And the One who will come again suddenly, perhaps in the evening, perhaps at midnight, perhaps at dawn, is the One who prays for those who are busy crucifying him:

³⁴Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.(Luke 23:34, KJV)

I do believe this, and bear witness to you, that time is never wasted that is given over to Him. Life is never wasted, but treasured highest of all, when given over to Him.

I now hasten on to my third question, “How can a practical man, a practical woman, a practical boy, a practical girl, *be ready* for Jesus?”

It has dawned on me recently that for all those many young adults who have sat in my pastor’s study while I reviewed with them the Catechism and prepared them for Baptism or the Affirmation of Baptism... for each of them I probably had the secret hope that they would drop everything and head off to seminary. So far, none have set out on this path, but I continue to hope. Heading off to seminary is what I did, when I at last turned to faith under the guidance of my pastor, and so I have been longing for others to follow that path. And so, I would convert the practical Martha’s of the world into the contemplative Mary’s. I would that they devote the rest of their lives to the proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

But that cannot be right. Jesus did not call all people away from their fishing nets or tax offices. Just a few, just the Twelve. Yet he called *everyone* to follow him, though most stayed in their own station in life.

⁴ RSV Romans 1:¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse...

This matter of the practical man or woman drawing near to Christ yet remaining in his or her own station was a big issue in the Lutheran Reformation. It had to do with what are called the “Counsels of Perfection.” These are some of the most lovely passages in the Bible. They come from the Sermon on the Mount:

³⁹But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.(Matthew 5:39-40, KJV)

²⁸And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: ²⁹And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?(Matthew 6:28-30, KJV)

As I understand it, the medieval Roman Catholic Church had tried to comfort laypeople who grieved at falling short of such Counsels of Perfection by saying that such Counsels are meant for the religious, for monastic folk, and for priests. Luther answered that that could not be so, and he worked for the end of the monasteries, wanting *all* Christians to seek perfection.

Still, it does not seem right to ask Martha to suddenly become Mary. Martha has her own life and station in life, and she should continue to follow that, and to work out her own salvation with fear and trembling⁵, knowing that it is God which works in her to both will and to do his good will.

There is a limitation on how easy you should be in your life about your Christian faith. That limitation is the dreadful judgment Jesus delivered against the church of the Laodiceans:

¹⁵I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.(Rev. 3:15-16, RSV)

Putting it all together, I reach this conclusion: Be passionate in your faith, which means be passionate in your vocation, in your romance, in your law office, in your parenting, in the multitude of calls and responsibilities you bear. Be passionate as you do these things, and but do them as Christ’s man! As Christ’s woman, boy, or girl. You cannot always be thinking of spiritual matters, but whatever you are thinking of, you can try to bring something of the spirit of Christ to it.

And so it, that we will be found ready when Christ comes again. We will be found desiring to free of sin, to found in Christ, and to be doing our work in the world as an offering of love to our neighbors and to Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

⁵ Philippians 2:12-13: ¹²Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. ¹³For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.(KJV)