November 29, 2026 Advent 1
Mark 13:24-37 Pastor Jeff Laustsen

"Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow."

"Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

As I was coming out of our local supermarket on Long Island, two members of our local fire department were handing out leaflets on hurricane preparedness. In previous years, I might have dismissed this as preparing for something that rarely occurred in the area; but after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy in November 2012, I knew that this was something to be taken seriously, especially since our home was only five miles from the ocean. The leaflet was filled with a lot of very useful information on how to be prepared in the event of another hurricane, including instructions on how to create a "Go Bag," a pre-packed backpack or suitcase filled with essential items that is ready to be grabbed at a moment's notice in the event of an evacuation order in advance of a storm hitting the Long Island coast. A Go Bag (also called a "Grab-and-Go Bag or a Seventy-Two Hour Kit) is a portable emergency kit packed in advance of an emergency evacuation. It typically holds at least three days of essential supplies such as food and water, medications, personal hygiene items, documents and cash, flashlights, phone chargers, clothing and blankets. Pre-packed Go Bags can be purchased online, or a person can put one together themselves, but they can be an important means of surviving an emergency evacuation that might take a person away from their home for several days.

Even if you do not live in a hurricane-prone area, having emergency supplies available is always wise. We have all experienced sudden blackouts when our electricity goes out, and we are left in the dark searching for essential supplies; knowing where our Go Bag is located can make a tremendous difference in such uncertain times. Knowing where essential supplies are located in times of unexpected crisis can make the difference between keeping calm and panicking in times of crisis. But as essential as a Go Bag and other emergency supplies may be, they are not items that are at the center of our focus during normal times. We need to be prepared for what may happen in the future, but we also need to focus on the present and our assigned tasks and responsibilities for the day that is before us.

This call to be prepared for the future while focusing on the present is the message we hear in today's Gospel lesson on this first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year and the beginning of the season that calls us to prepare for the

coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Advent was originally modeled after Lent, a period of preparation in advance of the celebration of a major festival such as Easter and Christmas. Advent took on many of the penitential aspects of Lent; for many years it even shared the liturgical colour of purple. More recently, Advent has taken on its own character as a time of joyful anticipation and preparation for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ at Christmas and also for our belief that in our time we anticipate the day when our Saviour will *"come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."* (Nicene Creed). Advent now has its own seasonal colour of blue, symbolizing the hope that we experience as we await the coming of the one who is *Emmanuel,* "God with us."

Today's Gospel lesson may sound strange in a season in which we are preparing our homes and our gatherings for the celebration of Christmas. Mark 13 bears none of the messages we are used to hearing in this season: the announcement of John the Baptist for God's people to *"prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!"* (Mark 1:3); the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary that *"you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus"* (Luke 1:31); and the message that the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled when Matthew proclaims that *"the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"* (Matthew 1:25). Instead, we have a Gospel reading in which we hear about *"the Son of Man coming in clouds"* (Mark 13:26) and warnings for us to *"beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come"* (13:33). It is a message that seems out of play in this season of joyful anticipation, yet a message that reminds us that Advent calls us to not only look back to when our Lord came as the child of Mary but to the future when Christ will come in fulfillment of God's promises. It calls us to remember what we often proclaim in worship, that *"Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."*

Mark 13 is often called the "Little Apocalypse" as it displays several characteristics of apocalyptic literature found in such books as Daniel and Revelation. It shares a deterministic and pessimistic view of history, anticipation of the end of the world in some great and imminent crisis, a dualistic understanding of human existence, and visions of cosmic upheaval. The symbolism in the chapter is drawn from Old Testament apocalyptic literature and is deeply related to passages in such New Testament books as 2 Thessalonians and Revelation.

- "The coded language of ancient Jewish apocalyptic interacts with its own present context to affirm that God is on God's way to deliver the oppressed and deal in a full and final way with the ills of the world. This coded language is less about predicting the minutia of the future in highly specific ways and

more about using symbolism to speak of the current (oppressive, worrisome, etc.) situation, expressing the conviction that God will make all things right." – April Hoelke Simpson

Both of the first two sections of Mark 13 end with a note of warning for God's people that the persecutions they will face will require endurance (*"But the one who endures to the end will be saved."* – 13:13) and that the presence of false messiahs requires careful attention to the prophecies of the prophets of the Lord (*"But be alert; I have already told you everything."* – 13:23). Both sections also assure the faithful that they will be among the elect (*"... but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days"* – 13:20b). Jesus' words in this prophetic discourse direct our attention from the present or impending historical experiences of persecution to the culmination of all things at the end time; *"The faithful testimony of Jesus' disciples before human courts will assure them that the Son of Man will testify on their behalf in the heavenly court."* (Pheme Perkins).

Today's Gospel lesson is introduced by the phrase *"but in those days, after that suffering"* (13:24), which marks a basic shift in the time frame of Jesus' message. Every significant phrase in the opening verses is borrowed from the Old Testament, proclaiming that the coming of the Son of Man is imminent even though the time when he will come is unknown.

- "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree." – Isaiah 34:4.
- "As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the ancient one and was presented before him." – Daniel 7:13.
- "Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the LORD." – Zechariah 2:10.

The ascent of the Son of Man to the divine throne marks the end of the war being waged against God's "holy ones." God gives judgment on their behalf and bestows an everlasting dominion upon them (*"But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever."* (Daniel 7:18). Jesus' message to his followers is that he is the *"Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."* (13:26-27).

- "These prophecies formulate a message of hope, which encourages the disciple to endure the hardships of testimony to the gospel. Those who do so will be gathered to the people of God, the elect." – Perkins.

Jesus points to the familiar image of a fig tree to reinforce his teaching: *"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near."* (13:28). Similarly, when God's people see these things, they will know that *"he is near, at the very gates"* (13:29). As Christians begin to see events that conform to previous predictions, they are assured that the day of salvation for the elect is nearby. The promise of the enduring validity of Jesus' words recalls the promise of eternal made real in Daniel and Isaiah, using prophetic sayings about the authority of God's Word as a model:

- "To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." – Daniel 7:14.
- "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." – Isaiah 40:8.
- "Lift up your eyes to the heaven and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, and the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation shall be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended." – Isaiah 51:6.

Jesus' Word is identified as God's Word; he is greater than the prophets who deliver God's Word to the people. He assures those who hear his message that *"heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."* (13:31).

Jesus turns his attention to the speculation that he knows what is swirling among his followers as to when all that God has promised will be fulfilled. His message that *"this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place"* (13:30) would be misinterpreted by many who first heard these words to believe that the coming of the Lord would occur in their lifetimes; even St. Paul appears to have believed in the Lord's imminent return in his early writings:

- "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died … Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever." – 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17.

Jesus warns those who would engage in such speculation that *"about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"* 13:32). Despite the assurance that Jesus' words will come true before the present generation has died, no one actually knows when God has decided that the end of the world will come (as the risen Lord will warn his disciples before his ascension, *"it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority"* (Acts 1:7). If the time is unknown, then no one can expect a warning of its arrival; the only solution is constant watchfulness. Faithful servants do not need to know when the master will return; Christians must also keep awake for their Master's return: *"What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."* (13:37).

- "Our Job, as Jesus reminds us over and over again, is to be prepared for that day. Beyond that, it's all God's decision. Jesus tells us not to bother working out the timing anyway, as it is entirely up to the Divine and their sense of timing a logic. What we can control, Jesus reminds us, is whether we are prepared to such an extent that we can remain aware even subconsciously." – Christy Randazzo.

Over against all attempts to fix the date of the *Parousia,* Jesus states plainly that not even the Son knows the day or the hour of his coming, but only the Father. The text announces God's intervention in history to judge and to save and calls for hope in the coming of the Son of Man. The vision of the future in Mark 13 serves to strengthen discipleship in the present, arming believers against the wiles of deceivers (*"Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray."* – 13:5b-6). Jesus' message sustains us no matter what suffering or persecution we may endure and motivates us to get on with our task of preaching the gospel to all nations (*"And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations."* – 13:10). Jesus' message *"speaks to those who expect too much and those who expect too little. It is especially pertinent for those who have forgotten to expect anything at all."* (Lloyd Williamson, Jr.).

While Jesus' message about being prepared for his coming may not be one we expect in this season of preparation for the celebration of his birth, it is a reminder that Advent is not only a time when we look back to when God's promises about the birth of our Saviour were fulfilled, but is a season in which we look ahead to the fulfillment of God's promises in the fullness of time. God's Word is not merely a historical record of what God has done in the past but a living Word about what God is doing among God's people today and what will happen in the future when all that God has promised is accomplished. It is a reminder of the word of the Lord that was

first proclaimed by Isaiah and remains our blessed assurance that at the heart of our faith is *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow"* (ELW Hymn 733):

- "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I purpose, and succeed in the things for which I sent it." – Isaiah 55:10-11.

Jesus' message at the beginning of this season of Advent and the beginning of this church year remind us that God's kingdom will come and God's Will shall be accomplished *"on earth as it is in heaven,"* which assures us that *"our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through the Holy Spirit's grace we believe God's holy word and live godly lives in time and hereafter in eternity." (Small Catechism).* It is a call for us to be prepared for the coming of our Lord which will happen at a moment's notice, to have our spiritual "Go Bags" prepared and ready to be taken when that day arrives. But as we do not obsess about these emergency supplies nor even think about them until they are needed, neither should we be obsessing about our Lord's return or neglecting our call to be the people who will proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ until our Lord's return. As God's Word gives us "bright hope for tomorrow," the Holy Spirit gives us the "strength for today" that we need so that we might be the people of God who *"proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9).

- "I'd argue that our focus shouldn't be on preparing for a day that may or may not happen in the time of human existence, as that's impossible to prepare for. What we can do instead, however, is practice seeing Jesus in every person we encounter and treating them accordingly. The more you get in the habit of doing that with every person, the more you will take on this posture as second nature, so that you needn't fear the moment Jesus calls you. You'll know what to do because it's what you've been doing so consistently that you can do it in your sleep." – Randazzo.

While there is no proof that he actually wrote or said it, a famous saying attributed to Martin Luther states that *"even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree,"* an expression of faithful perseverance, hope, and commitment to duty in the face of crisis or uncertainty. As we prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we are reminded that while we believe that he will come again and gather us into our eternal home that in the meantime our call is to be faithful to the tasks that have been entrusted to us: *"to*

serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth" (ELW Affirmation of Baptism).

- "The conviction that God is going to make all things right is not a mandate to do nothing … Instead, God will our faithfulness. We must ask where we can take part in the manifestation of God's kingdom by being agents of justice and healing in the world." – Simpson.

As it is wise to be prepared for an unexpected crisis with a Go Bag or other emergency supplies, it is wise for us to be prepared for the day when our Lord will fulfill God's promises for us and for all God's people. As we share this "bright hope for tomorrow," let us also relay on God's "strength for today" so that we might be faithful to our call in this time and place to *"care for all, without reserve, and spread God's liberating Word"* (ELW Hymn 729).

Amen.