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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
27 October 2024

Sermon on Mark 13:5-11

Worship Theme:

**LIVE A LIFE OF COURAGEOUS WITNESS**

Jesus repeatedly told his followers that living as his disciples would bring hardship. Sharing a message of mankind's sin and God's gracious salvation can cause offense. So why not just stay silent if that makes life easier? Answer: because we are going to live forever. In gratitude for Christ saving us and giving us eternal life, we share the gospel with others, hoping that they will believe and be saved too. Since we know we are going to live forever in the perfection of heaven, we don't worry if being a witness for Christ brings hardship or even death.

Sermon Theme: "The Gospel Must Be Preached"

1. Watch Out
2. Speak Out

Is it a big deal if the Gospel is not preached? In the Lutheran Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we take a lot of things for granted. That's perhaps most true for those of us who worship in America under the protection of freedom of religion. There is no state church or any church controlled or mandated by the government. We are free to worship however and whomever we wish. As a result, we take for granted the priceless blessings that are part of our worship, such as the public reading of God's Word (not just part, but ALL of it!) in a language we can understand. We take for granted that every week when we walk into this church building and open our bulletins, we will see a portion of God's Word titled "the Gospel" and we will hear the most beautiful message from Scripture – undeserved good news.

That hasn't always been the case throughout history, however. There have been plenty of times when the gospel has been obscured, obstructed, and rejected. That was certainly true in Jesus' day when the Pharisees and others tried to force people to follow whatever laws they made up and added to Scripture as the only way to be a truly righteous and religious person. It was true in the days of Martin Luther and the reformers when the Christian Church almost exclusively taught that people must contribute something in order to be saved, because God was so angry at them for their sin that if they didn't shape up and do all the right things, hell was basically a guarantee. And it's certainly true today as so many Christian Churches still focus on what we do for God over and above what God has done for us, insisting that logic and human reasoning demand human involvement in this work if heaven is ever going to be a possible eternal home for us.

Should that concern us? Is it really that big of a deal if the gospel is not preached? Does it really matter if Christians get just a bit more focused on other things in life more than the gospel? After all, there are some pretty important things happening in our world right now! Think about our context for a moment:

war between Ukraine and Russia, war in the Middle East, concerns about nuclear weapons, communities in America devastated by hurricanes, an insanely charged and polarizing presidential race, concerns about the economy and the job market and interest rates and the cost of day-to-day living, concerns about reproductive issues and the right to life (for any age, from the unborn to the elderly!), concerns about human sexuality and gender, not to mention all the other things in our personal lives such as juggling sports practices for the kids, finishing that big project at work, managing conflict between family members, paying bills that constantly seem to be going up, taking care of physical and mental health, and so much more. Wouldn't it make perfect sense for us to say, "I can't really worry about what's happening at church or in religion right now, God. As you can see, I'm a little busy taking care of the rest of this stuff! Plus, I need people to be on my side and to see my point of view, so I can't afford to challenge this relationship by speaking your Word right now. I'll get to that later when these things are done."

Can we agree that those things deserve some level of importance and focus in our lives? Sure, we can agree on that. But then the question to ask is: are they worthy of the degree of importance and prominence we have given them? Jesus had something to say about that when his disciples became focused on the things around them more than on him and his Word. At the beginning of Mark 13, we read: *As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"*<sup>2</sup> *"Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."* They were walking around so enthralled by what they saw that they couldn't imagine anything greater. Four of Jesus' disciples later asked him, *"When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to be fulfilled?"*

And that's when our verses for today begin: *Jesus said to them, "Watch out."* THAT we can all certainly get on board with, right? We've been watching out our entire lives! Every generation has had something to "watch out" for – whether it was wars or terrorists or diseases or things that don't line up with our personal thoughts and opinions or whatever else we may have been warned about in our lives; we watch out all the time! So is that what Jesus is talking about here? "Watch out that dictators don't get into positions of power and leadership." "Watch out that COVID doesn't ruin your life." "Watch out that the wrong person doesn't end up as governor or president."

Nope. That's not what Jesus says at all. Jesus says, *"Watch out that no one deceives you."* About what? *"Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many."* Watch out that what doesn't happen? Watch out that the gospel is not lost. Jesus continues, *"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines."* In other words, look around you – there's nothing unexpected happening here! Wars and natural disasters and whatever else – not surprising in a broken sinful world! Of course these things are going to happen! So

is that what we focus on? All the things happening in the world that we somehow think our thoughts and opinions and abilities will solve?

No, that's not why Jesus told us to "*watch out.*" He explains further, "*You must be on your guard,*" or a bit more literally, "watch yourselves" or "see yourselves." Don't focus so much on the crazy things happening all around the world that we naturally expect to see in a fallen creation. (Notice we don't have to agree with or support all of them, but we certainly aren't surprised when they happen.) Rather Jesus encourages, focus on yourself and remember who you are.

*"You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them."* Because you're a Republican or Democrat? No. Because you have something to say about pro-life/pro-choice? No. Because you think we need to save Israel, Ukraine, Florida, North Carolina, and anywhere else having problems right now? No. *"On account of me."* BECAUSE OF ME, Jesus says!

Time for the good Lutheran question: What does this mean? What is Jesus saying when he says all of this is *on account of him*? It means remember who you truly are and focus on what truly matters. God's Word makes it abundantly clear what we mean when we say that. *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* [Romans 3] That's who you and I and all people are on our own. That's the clear message of God's Law, both written in our hearts and written clearly in his Word. No one is sinless and no one can change that about themselves. That's who we are!

But that's also not the end of the story. *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."* [Romans 1] *And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* <sup>25</sup> *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood.* [Romans 3] That's who Jesus is for us. This is the great revelation Martin Luther rediscovered 500 years ago, the great truth that is of the very highest and utmost importance for every single person on earth: God himself is the very righteousness and perfection he requires from us. God demands 100% complete obedience to his holy law if we are ever to enter eternal glory in his presence, and so Jesus 100% completely obeyed for us. God demands the payment of blood as the punishment and price for sin, and so Jesus laid his holy and perfect life down upon the altar of God's wrath and willingly died for us. And as undeniable proof that this mission is completed and the sacrifice accepted, Jesus rose again to life, death and sin defeated once and for all, for us.

The law has been obeyed, the death has been died, and the proof is the living Christ – and THAT is why ***the gospel must be preached!*** Because nowhere else will anyone ever find such complete deliverance. Nowhere else will anyone find such love and peace. We sang it right before this sermon, and the hymn (#568) is so good and so important that we should hear again what Jesus did for us:

1. His robes for mine: O wonderful exchange!  
Clothed in my sin, Christ suffered 'neath God's rage.  
Draped in his righteousness, I'm justified ("declared not guilty!").  
In Christ I live, for in my place he died.

2. His robes for mine: what cause have I for dread?  
God's daunting law Christ mastered in my stead.  
Faultless I stand with righteous works not mine,  
saved by my Lord's vicarious ("in our place!") death and life.

3. His robes for mine: God's justice is appeased.  
Jesus is crushed, and thus the Father's pleased.  
Christ drank God's wrath on sin, then cried, "'Tis done!"  
Sin's wage is paid, propitiation ("appeasing or satisfying a higher power") won.

4. His robes for mine: such anguish none can know.  
Christ, God's beloved, condemned as though his foe.  
He, as though I, accursed and left alone;  
I, as though he, embraced and welcomed home!

**Refrain:** I cling to Christ, and marvel at the cost: Jesus forsaken, God estranged  
from God. Bought by such love, my life is not my own. My praise—my all—shall  
be for Christ alone.

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So is it a big deal if that gospel isn't preached? YES! We are never saved by anything else that happens or doesn't happen in this world. We are not saved by a president, we're not saved by the existence of a nation (ours or any other!), we're not saved by peace on earth, we're not saved by "the right" laws and regulations in our country. We're not saved by anything the human race can do. No, we cling to Christ who willingly traded his holiness for our sin. Painful things will continue to happen in this broken world for as long as it exists, but dear friends, *do not be alarmed*. Rather, **watch out that no one deceives you**. Do not lose the priceless good news of what Jesus has done for you. Instead, **speak out!** Live a life of courageous witness and boldly proclaim that God has saved people from sin – ***the gospel must be preached to all nations!*** And *do not worry about what to say*. Be faithful in your use of God's Word – make it your highest priority to spend time in it, and read over and over again how much God loves you, so that when the opportunity comes, you can *say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit*. Never take for granted what we have been given and don't lose your focus on what alone has the power to save us. The Holy Word of God is more accessible to us than ever before, and the gospel of Jesus triumphs over everything; read it, love it, and share it – it's a really big deal! AMEN!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.