

“Keep Watch”

I'm going to do something at the beginning of this sermon that I have never done before, and I doubt that I will ever do it again. I'm going to get out my cell phone and take a “sermon selfie.” Are you ready? Everyone smile! As a matter of fact, I don't even usually carry my cell phone while I am preaching, because I am always scared that it would ring and I will have forgotten to silence it. It's not a distraction that I need.

However, I've come to learn how much of a distraction cell phones can be, for me and for others. I heard a piece on the radio just a few days ago that spoke about a growing trend of selfie deaths. What is happening more and more is that people while taking selfies are actually being seriously injured and even killed. Some are simply doing foolish things, like a picture in a speeding car or a picture on train tracks. Others, it seems, just lose track of where they are and fall from a height, like off a cliff or something similar. Now, I certainly don't want to belittle any time a death occurs. All human life is a precious gift from God and these stories are sad and even heartbreaking. At the same time, I think they may illustrate the warning that Jesus shares with us in our sermon text.

Think of it this way: the selfie taker is so focused on getting the right framing and the right lighting and the right background, in other words, is so focused on himself, that he just doesn't realize the danger that is right there, about to have a serious effect on him. Jesus is warning all of us that we can easily be focused on ourselves and on our background and circumstances that we fail to realize the danger that is headed our way. That danger is the final judgment, the last day when Jesus returns to judge all people. He describes how many people are going to be completely surprised by that event. They will be going about their regular business. They will be preoccupied with work and with earthly relationships. We see that happening, don't we? People are preoccupied with presidential elections and with celebrity gossip. They are preoccupied with holiday preparations and purchases. Simply put, people are preoccupied with themselves. And if the return of Jesus finds them, or finds us, unprepared, it is more than dangerous, more than deadly. It is eternally destructive. So Jesus says, “Keep Watch.”

His warning takes on extra significance for us, as we read in Romans: **“The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed”** (Romans 13:11). Therefore, keep watch.

Jesus spoke these words originally to his disciples. And the context is interesting. Jesus had been teaching in the Temple courts, and as he was leaving his disciples commented on the impressive buildings, the structure of the Temple. Jesus announced that those buildings would one day be completely demolished. Jesus' disciples assumed that could only happen at the last day, so they asked Jesus about the last day and his return. So Jesus spoke to them both about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and also about the last day. He listed signs that they could use to recognize the coming of the last days. He urged them to remain faithful and not to be swayed by false teaching. And right in the middle of these warnings and admonitions, Jesus spoke the words of our sermon text.

When would the last day come? It made sense that the disciples would want to know. Who wouldn't be interested in that sort of information? But they couldn't know. Jesus wouldn't tell them, and he couldn't tell them. That's right, as surprising as it seems, Jesus the true and all-knowing God had in his humility set aside that knowledge. The angels who obey his commanding don't know the day either. Only the Father.

The world has heard this warning before. God told Noah to build an ark, a gigantic floating barge, to rescue himself and his family when God destroyed the world with a flood. He listened, but the people around him did not. They went on eating and drinking, dating and marrying. If they had the technology, they would have been snapping selfies in front of Noah's ridiculous boat right up until the rain started falling. And suddenly, totally unexpected by them, the floods rose and overtook them. It was too late. If

they would have listened to Noah, they would have been prepared. If they had listened, they could have been saved.

And that is how it will be at the last day. Marrying and giving in marriage, eating and drinking, working and playing, life will be going on as it has been. And Jesus will come, and some will be taken and some will be left. That is an interesting way that Jesus describes what will happen. It is a little different than some of his references to the judgment. But it is not a new teaching about those who will be left behind to fend for themselves in this world when the believers are taken away. Jesus is just describing in a different way what the judgment will be like. Some will be saved. They will be taken with him to heaven. Some will be left. They will depart from him to the fiery punishment of hell.

That is the real danger. That is the eternal danger about which Jesus is warning. Being left for judgment is precisely what we deserve on our own. It is exactly what our actions have earned and what our sinfulness warrants. If we are unprepared for Christ's coming, then we will get exactly what we deserve.

But that is the purpose of Jesus' warning, that we are prepared for when he comes. That we are taken to be with him forever, not because of what we have done, but because of what he has done for us! He suffered the hellish torment that we had earned and gave us the righteousness that he had attained. He sent his Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we might trust in his sacrifice and rely on his righteousness. For us to keep watch means that we remember his sacrifice for us, that we live lives of thankfulness. It means that we grow in faith and knowledge through his Word and sacrament. It means that we take our eyes off of ourselves and focus them on our Savior Jesus.

He's coming back. You don't know when it will happen, so be ready for it to happen at any time. Jesus uses a new picture to explain this. He compares it to a man whose house is robbed at night. The thief came when he wasn't expecting that, so he was soundly sleeping. If he had known that the thief was coming, he would have stayed on the watch or enlisted the help of others. He would have been prepared. So the only answer for those who do not know the day or the time is to always be prepared.

Today we can put fancy locks on our houses. We can have a security system set up with a team of people monitoring it at every second so that the instant a thief tries to break in, he is stopped. But with the second coming of Jesus, it is different. No one can do the watching out for us. We can't simply find better locks for the house and then forget about the thief coming. We have to be diligent. We have to be ready.

So, what does that mean? What does that look like? How do we keep watch? Well, this is a good start. Come to church. Join your fellow believers in hearing God's Word in hymns and in the various parts of our services and in the readings and in the sermons. And don't say, "Well, today I'm really tired, so I better sleep in instead." Don't say, "I'll get there next week." Don't say, "I've heard it all before." Certainly there are legitimate reasons for missing an occasional church service. But make this and continue to make it a priority in your life. Fill up each week on the good news of salvation. Focus your thoughts and minds again on Jesus. Be ready. Keep watch.

Keep watch by digging deeper into God's Word. Study the Bible with your pastors and fellow believers. Read it on your own in daily devotions. Share it with your family members. Hear and meditate on and speak the good news that Jesus died for you, that God loves you so much that he sent a Savior, that he adopted you into his family, that he made you ready for salvation.

And then look around. Look for those temptations that still tug at your sinful nature. Realize those things that could cause you to lose focus on Jesus if you are not careful. Confess them to Jesus knowing he already died for them. Confess them to your Christian friend or your pastor to hear from them God's own word of absolution, of forgiveness. Keep watch.

I'm not planning any more pulpit selfies any time soon. But I doubt selfies are going away any time soon. If you are taking them, make sure you are being careful about any dangers that surround you. And as you see them or take them, let them remind you that there are other dangers out there to be on your guard against. Let them remind you that Jesus is coming again soon. Let them remind you to keep watch.

The text: Matthew 24:36–44 (NIV84)

³⁶ “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.

That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

⁴² “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”