

A Thief in the Night
Mathew 24:36-44, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Friends, do you remember what it was like when you were in grade school – and your teacher would leave the classroom?

Usually she would say something like – Class - I need to run down to the office for a few minutes so I want you all to sit quietly and work on your assignments!

And then she would leave...and almost immediately kids would take out a favorite library book they wanted to read instead, or some food to eat, the girls would turn around in their seats to start talking to one another and passing notes, the guys would start picking on each other and the spitballs and paper airplanes would fly...

we would pretty much do anything but - sit quietly and work on the assignment – right?

However we weren't foolish... so someone was always posted at the classroom door as a lookout. To warn us when the

teacher was coming back, and when they sounded the alarm – “she’s coming! She’s coming!” there would be a mad scramble as everyone returned to their seats and tried to look as if they’d been working studiously on the assignment.

Of course sometimes the lookout would sound the alarm just for fun – after all they were stuck watching for the teacher and they couldn't join in the mayhem, so they would get their kicks by giving a false alarm and watching everyone scramble in panic.

But if they did this too many times, when the teacher really was coming nobody would pay any attention to them – a classic example of the boy who cried wolf...or teacher in this case, and when the teacher came back in the classroom to find us all fooling around and goofing off – boy were we in trouble!

And then we would all be angry and upset with the lookout for getting us in trouble, but in reality it was our fault for goofing

off and not doing what the teacher had instructed us to do, right?

And friends when people make predictions about judgment day and Christ's return it can have the same kind of effect.

At first it might spook us, cause us to do a bit of a mad scramble to get everything in order for Christ's return...

But once the predicted date comes and goes and we see that it was just a false alarm, well... we feel annoyed at the person who sounded the alarm, we're relieved that we can get back to what we were doing before, and we're less inclined to believe the next person who makes such a prediction.

And there have been plenty of these kinds of predictions in the two thousand years since Christ ascended to heaven,

- Emmanuel Swedenborg claimed that Christ would return in the year 1757,

- George Rapp predicted it would happen on September 15, 1829,
- William Miller picked Oct 22, 1844
- Charles Taze Russell, first president of the Watchtower Society predicted 1874
- Herbert W. Armstrong was fairly certain that it would be in 1975
- Bill Maupin set the date at June 28, 1981
- Benjamin Crème said "no it's about a year later June 21, 1982"
- Even Nostradamus' crazy visions have been read as predicting 1999

You'd think people would have learned by now but no...

There's still

- Paul Sides – Sept 13, 2007,
- Mark Biltz – Sept 30, 2008
- And of course in the recent past there was Mr. Harold Camping – who predicted October 21, 2011 having previously selected May 21, 2011, September 6, 1994.

And not everyone feels these people are correct... because Jack Van Impe thought it would happen sometime in 2012, and a fellow named Troy Brooks says no, it will be in 2022.

So, friends, how do you feel when you hear someone sound the alarm that Christ is coming back? Annoyed, angry, indifferent, or uncertain perhaps?

Well friends, I know that as a result of all these false alarms many people feel that Christ will not return... they don't believe he's coming back at all!

They no longer feel any sense of expectation, urgency or anxiety about the teacher coming back into the room...

So they're not really worried about what would happen if they were not found doing what the teacher instructed them to do when he or she left.

And its good to ask - has that become the case for us as well?

Now friends - I don't condone making predictions about a specific date for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially since the bible is so explicitly clear that no one knows this date – not angels, not even Jesus himself!

But I wonder if perhaps some of the people who have ended up making these kinds of predictions may have simply started out with the goal of trying to get the people, the followers of Jesus in their time to get their priorities straight in life...

...to live each day with a sense of anticipation and expectation that once Christ had ascended into Heaven, God's plan to make this world a new place is just about complete – we're just waiting for Christ to return!

and friends... if we knew the day that Christ would return to bring in the Kingdom of Heaven – that would make a big difference in us wouldn't it....

And if we were honest - we'd probably be very nervous right. We wouldn't be able to settle down and relax about Christ's

return until we'd gotten everything straightened and taken care of so that we'd be ready for it, right?

Because when the Kingdom of Heaven comes we know there will be an evaluation of us, a settling of accounts – as Jesus' taught us in his parables.

So I'm sure if we knew the date when this would occur, we'd be more concerned about ensuring that we are in good standing with Christ.

And we'd spend most of our energies and efforts on making sure of that... instead of on the kinds of things which we tend to focus our lives around.

So friends, while we can and should criticize those people who predict a date for the return of Christ, since they are doing something the scripture blatantly says not to do –

Remember... they are only in error for trying to predict a date and time – they have not erred in being convinced that Christ will return and bring judgment with him.

Because the fact is friends it is very easy to forget that Christ said we ought to anticipate and expect his return – and instead get sidetracked by life, and forget that we will eventually need to give an account to our Lord... and live as though it won't happen.

That's why Jesus says *"if the owner of the house knew the time the thief was coming he would have kept watch and not let his house be broken into"* (Matt 24:43)

So Friends, what God wants to say to us through these scripture passages this morning is that in spite of the fact that many false alarms have been sounded, we mustn't stop being prepared or expecting Christ's return and the judgment that accompanies it.

We are instructed to “keep watch” and “be ready” because the judgment will come when you do not expect it.

Jesus says, life will be going on as normal when he will return. People will be making plans for their lives, for their future – getting engaged, getting married...

They will be going about their daily lives, feeling comfortable and familiar in their daily routine of work and sleep and coffee, working in the fields and in the kitchen....and then suddenly its judgment day, without warning.

And if we are not ready for it...well, the one working in the field who wasn't prepared is taken in judgment; the one working in the kitchen who wasn't prepared is taken in judgment – but the ones who were prepared.... survive, they remain after the judgment is over, they are left behind...

So...how are you feeling now? Like you've just had a bucket of cold water thrown on you to keep you from dozing off, to bring you back to your senses?

Because that's the temptation isn't it... we can become sleepy, drowsy, hazy or slightly buzzed, distracted by the partying that goes on around us while the teacher is out of the room.

We are tempted to join in the mayhem that's going on while the teacher is away.

And sometimes it truly is mayhem – a wild party lifestyle, sex drugs and rock'n'roll...

And other times it's the comfortably numbing sense of security from a good job, a good family and a good retirement package.

Either way, we are tempted to believe that we can neglect what the teacher instructed us to do when He left the room.

We'll get around to the assignment eventually...look at how many times people have predicted that Jesus was coming back – and it's never happened - he's still not here. We have some time, right?

Well, truth be told – we don't know if we really do or don't.

But we of all people... we should not be surprised at the return of Christ – because as the Apostle Paul puts it – we are children of the light, children of the day.

We are sober, prepared, confident, alert... especially after being reminded of the fact – that Jesus will come back!

Hopefully this is like having a bucket of cold water thrown on us to wake us up.

So does this mean we need to be in church all the time, praying and reading the bible all the time, giving away all of our belongings to charity...feeling like we shouldn't have any attachments to this life and this world?

No, the judgment Jesus' speaks of vs. 40 does not come because people are in the field or the kitchen instead of praying or doing "spiritual" things...

Remember that Jesus comes to bring in the new heavens and the new earth. (2 Peter 3:13) and to determine who will live in this new world.

So, being prepared for the return of Christ then means three things for us.

First it means that we are aware that the question we will face on judgment day is "have we always been a 100% faithful covenant partner to your creator? (Which is not the same as have you been a good person and tried hard in life?")

So in other words...

We've always worshipped God and God alone,
we've never had an idol in our life,
we've always had a pure heart,
never once wanting to disobey God's commands
we've always thanked God for everything,
never ever taken Him for granted...

You get the picture... and I know there is no way I can say yes I've always been a 100% faithful covenant partner, and friends know that you can't either, judgment day is only going to confirm this for us officially.

So then, the second aspect of being prepared for Christ's return means that since we are aware of our deficiency we look to Him to make up for it. That's what our whole Substitute Sermon series was all about.

Jesus Christ was the perfect, 100%, all-time faithful covenant partner with God and he is available as our substitute on judgment day.

So when the question is put to us, we answer honestly saying – no, I haven't been a 100% faithful covenant partner to you God, forgive me - but I believe Jesus was and I trust in him as my substitute.

Friends this faith we have, that was accomplished because of the love of Jesus Christ, to offer himself as our substitute, it is our protection against judgment.

As Paul says in 1 Thess 5: 8 *"it guards our heart as a breastplate"* from being fatally stabbed by despair, guilt, or self-condemnation – or when God show us the truth of who we are.

It's easy to doubt and to fear if we are truly forgiven, and the devil willingly pitches in to help us along – and makes us wonder if we are suffering because God hates us, or wants to punish us for something, or crush us because we are too happy...

Friends those thoughts and feelings are false!

It is Christ's substitution for us as a covenant partner which assures us God is not against us in this life or at Christ's return – he is for us.

1 Thes 5:9 says *“God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”*

So friends, in light of all this – the third aspect of being prepared for Christ’s return involves doing what Christ told us to do when he ascended to heaven.

Jesus’ instructions for us in Acts 1:8 were this *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

And, friends - if you think about it, witnesses are people who give testimony; they speak and share about what Christ has done in their lives;

how he has created everything... how he is our source of comfort and strength, how He is the truth, how He is our everyday substitute – and secures our relationship with our Creator – and so much more!

So we do this – like we did in our AGM last week - just as Paul says in 1 Thes 5:11, that we must encourage each other.

But we can’t just talk to ourselves friends. While it is good to encourage each other – it’s also very easy for that sort of thing to become inward focused, where we are just preaching to the choir...

And in fact – the greatest danger facing Valleyview now – is not the threat of closing down, like it used to be... No, the threat now is that we forget who are to witness too.

Those who are not yet Christians in the surrounding community.

The truth is friends - that as wonderful a place as Valleyview is on Sundays – the non-Christians in our community are not likely to come here on a Sunday morning,

So... if they won’t come to church – we need to bring the church to them.

We need to speak to our family, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors, our fellow hockey and soccer parents, the person who serves us our coffee over at Waves.

We need to “witness” to anyone and everyone that Christ puts into our path.

That’s what Christ told us to work on while he was away – and we’d better remember to stay busy with that, so that when He returns, he will end up interrupting us in the middle of sharing with someone about what He’s done in our lives.

And so friends – it’s important that you go about your daily business, because while these actions may be very earthly and ordinary... they are very spiritual friends

The fact that as a Christian you play sports – is a witness that there will be sports – redeemed sports – in the new earth!

The fact that you use technology, do science, study, read, play music, create art, write books, design fashion and so on is

testimony that these things will be redeemed in the new heavens and the new earth!

And how you do them now, gives you opportunity to witness to others involved in them.

They provide the context for you to be witnesses, and the ordinary things you do are empowered by the Holy Spirit to become testimony of Christ’s work – which is ultimately expressed in a renewed earth

It is the Spirit who gives us the ability to testify in our words, and to witness through putting our faith into actions.

That’s how we live in order to stay ready for the return of Christ – which could happen at any moment....

So friends - how do you feel now when you hear those words “Christ will return, Christ is coming back?”

Encouraged I hope - grateful for Christ as our substitute,
relieved that we do not need to fear judgment, eager and
expectant to see Christ return...

And confident – that we know how to live in expectation of
that great and glorious day, when the kingdom of God finally
comes in its fullness.

Within our lifetime... perhaps - but if not we are confident we
will go to be with him anyway!

So friends, let us live then as children of the light, sober and
alert, so that we are not distracted by the mayhem and chaos
going on around in the classroom and so that we are ready
when the trumpet sounds to let us know – Christ is coming!
Christ is coming! Amen.