Open wide your door to the one who comes. Open your soul, throw open the depths of your heart to see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of peace, the sweetness of grace. Open your heart and run to meet the Sun of eternal light that illuminates all men. – *St. Ambrose of Milan*

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December 1st **The Shofar** **Advent 1**

Beware: the End really is nigh! Mark 13

As we read through Mark 13, we should keep our eyes open for the exhortations—*watch out, be on guard, stay awake!* Note especially the final verse of the chapter, where Jesus said this: *And what I say to you, I say to everyone: Be alert*! (v. 37). The Greek word translated "be alert" ("stay awake," "watch") is the very last word of the chapter, and Jesus' final word on this subject in Mark's Gospel. This is the point towards which Mark has been moving. In it we are encouraged, warned even, to be ready. Fortunately for us Scripture is not silent on how to prepare:

1. **Live in the light of His first coming.**

Do you want to be prepared for Jesus' second coming? Then live like His first coming mattered.

Jesus spoke parables about His return. In Luke 19:11-27, He told about a nobleman who travelled to a far country to become king. This nobleman called ten of his servants, gave them each a mina (coin), and told them: "engage in my business until I come back" (v. 13). After an unspecified duration of time, the nobleman returned as king and summoned his servants to give an account of their faithfulness. The first two servants had been productive with what was entrusted to them. But another servant had done nothing. He simply wrapped his mina in a cloth and hid it. His mistake was that he didn't act on what he professed to believe. He professed something about his master but did not live by his profession and as a consequence he lost his reward (vv. 21-23).

Those who profess Christ as Lord ***and live according to their profession*** will receive great reward when Jesus returns.

2. **Be discerning. False prophets abound.**

Twice in Mark 13 Jesus warned His disciples not to be led astray by false claim: *Watch out that no one deceives you… false prophets will arise and will perform signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the elect* (vv. 5-6,21-22). Paul warned, *Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him…. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way* (2 Thess. 2:1-3).

The warning of Scripture is consistent: use discernment in listening to those who claim to have all the details of the end times figured out and ignore those who resort to date setting end time events. Know the end is nigh and get on living and doing as Jesus taught us to live and be.

3. Accept the uncertainties.

Now concerning that day or hour no one knows—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son—but only the Father. Watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the time is coming (Mark 13:32-33). If Jesus was content not to know the day or hour, then we should stop speculating about it. Be content with "*no one knows … only the Father*."

4. Do not lose hope. **God is always reliable**

Paul reminded Titus that Jesus' first coming brought salvation and instructs us how to live "sensible, righteous, and godly" lives in this present age as collaborators with the Almighty as all things do indeed come to an End. It is our "blessed hope"—the expectation of Jesus' return—that compels us to do so (**Titus 2:11-13**).

5. Encourage one another.

The promise that *the Lord will descend from heaven with a shout* in **1 Thessalonians 4:16** is followed by a command: ***Therefore*** *encourage one another with these words* (**1 Thess. 4:18**). Again, the affirmation that *the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night* (**1 Thess. 5:2)** is followed by the powerful exhortation: *encourage one another and build each other up* (v. 11).

Scripture's teachings about the second coming are not given to satisfy our personal fascination

with future events but so that the body of Christ might encourage one another with the promises.

6. Live as if today was the Last Day.

If we're not careful, the delay in Jesus' return will lead us to complacency. Living in the expectation that He could return today compels us to live every day for what really matters—for eternity.

7. Keep on doing the work Jesus left us to do.

Jesus warned of troubling events as we near the end of the age, including persecution of believers (Mark 13:7-9). Then He added that nothing— not even the threat of persecution —should distract us from **the one necessary thing**: preach to the gospel to all nations (v. 10).

Before ascending into heaven, Jesus gave the church its marching orders: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth* (Acts 1:8). The very next verses reports that the disciples just stood there looking up into the sky. Two angels appeared and spoke the words the church today needs to hear: *Why are you standing there gazing into heaven? Jesus is coming back—so get busy!* (vv. 9-11).

The Season of Advent

It is for this reason the Church puts into her liturgical and pastoral calendar a reminder of the **Last Things**. We do not talk about these things all that often throughout the year but that does not mean we should forget about them and continue on with lives and hears unchanged. What are those Last Things of which the Church speaks?

The "Last Things" are traditional Christian understandings of the final stages of the soul in life and the afterlife:

Death: The first of the Four Last Things

Judgment: At death, each person must stand before the throne of God and face judgment.

Heaven: The final destination for those who die in God's grace.

Hell: Eternal death. An eternal alienation from God.

None of us enjoy facing these realities but our denial of them does not mean we will not have to face proceed through them. More Good News here. What Advent does is encourage us to walk with God, pay more attention to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and strive to more faithfully imitate the Way of Christ in the world. It is a time for recalibrating our lives as disciples, for intentionally building into our daily spiritual regiemes opportunities to discern where we stand in relation to God's expectations as revealed to us in Jesus, God's Chrost. The great comforting Truth is that God does not leave us un-resourced as we move through these Last Things. Empowering graces are ours for the asking, all of them free and unearned.

To express this in more biblical images we are talking about spiritual resilience and a perseverance in faithfulness … *[10] Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes (Ephesians 6).*

And this is exactly why we can be so unconcerned with the coming apocalypse. Yes, death is coming, judgment is coming, heaven and hell are coming, all temporal things will have their end, but ***we already know*** what that ending looks like: the triumph of life over death, the restoration of all things in Christ.

With the coming of Jesus Christ, the end of time has already begun. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension mark the "fullness of time." The ultimate meaning of human history is found in Jesus, through whom and for whom all things were created (John 1:1–10; Colossians 1:16). In the gift of grace, which flows from Christ's victory over sin and death, eternity begins ***now***. Or, as St. Thomas Aquinas says so beautifully: *Grace is nothing other than a beginning of glory in us*.

Through his sacred humanity, raised in glory and made present through the Church, his mystical body, he is active always and everywhere. At every moment, Jesus is present to the hearts of all, desiring the salvation of every person (1 Timothy 2:4). Jesus wants our salvation!!!

The source of our grace and our hope is there in the Scriptures for our empowering, for strengthening and for encouragement. The Truth that cannot be denied is also our hope: As Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, all await the resurrection of the body. This will occur at the Last