

**SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT – STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY – December 3 & 4,
2005**

St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

READ THE SIGNS - Matthew 24:4-14

When you are driving and you see a red eight sided sign, you know what is expected of you. That sign means that you are to come to complete stop. When you see a sign that indicates a curve and has a number below like 40 mph, you know that means you are coming to a curve and you need to slow down so that you don't lose control of your vehicle. Those of us who are drivers have learned to read the signs of the road so that we drive safely and properly. When you ignore a stop sign you put your life in jeopardy as well as the lives of other drivers. When you refuse to slow down for a curve, you can lose control of your vehicle and even cause a collision with someone else. Signs are important and they need to be read and observed.

There are also other signs that you and I see and make note of regularly. Businesses put up signs to alert us to sales and specials that they are offering. We are able to read signs that tell us about the weather. "Red sun in the morning, sailor take warning. Read sun at night, sailor's delight."

In the Word of God before us today, the Lord Jesus gives the disciples of his day and of today, signs of the end of the world and of his coming to judge all people. These are the signs that you and I need to be aware of and take note of. Jesus says to you and me **READ THE SIGNS.**

If someone had not taught us that a red eight sided sign means stop, we would not know that. Likewise, if Jesus had not told us what the signs of the end of the world were and the signs that point to his coming again to judge, we would not know that either. Jesus notes that there will be signs in society, in nature and in the church.

SIGNS IN SOCIETY

Have you noticed that things seem to be getting worse in our society? Immorality is more open and in your face. People are more openly corrupt in business and politics. We hear congressmen admitting that they have taken bribes and being sent to prison for their crimes. We have watched gigantic

businesses crumble and go bankrupt as their CEOs and other financial leaders have looted their corporations. Then there are the wars that continue to erupt throughout the world. There is the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan. There were riots in France. There are the tensions that exist between the Jews and the Arabs. You can look in almost every part of the world and find some political or armed conflict going on. Jesus tells us that this is a sign of the last days. He tells us, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom" (Vv 6-7a) We also see that people are not as warm and caring towards others. How many times don't we read or hear about people who walk by or look the other way when someone is being accosted, beaten, robbed or raped. They don't want to get involved. It's just as Jesus tells us, "because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold." (v. 12) We can expect as we get closer to the end of this present world's existence that things will not get better, but worse.

SIGNS IN NATURE

In addition to the signs we see in our society, Jesus also says you will see signs in the natural world. He mentions these two, "there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains." (Vv7b-8) Over 250,000 people killed by the earthquake in Southeast Asia which set off the tsunami almost a year ago. Since that time there have been more earthquakes. There was just one again last Sunday in Iran. Then think of the devastation brought on by the hurricanes this summer and fall in the southern part of our own country. When you consider that a city of over 460,000 people that was hit head on by hurricane Katrina, today three months later has only 60,000 people living in the city and a good portion of that city still is without power, gas and drinkable water. Then there are the famines that hit Africa regularly. We have had droughts that have been affecting our country this year and for the last several years. All of the natural disasters that we have seen this year are again signs that God is setting before us to remind us that we are in the last days and the end is getting closer.

SIGNS IN THE CHURCH

There are also signs that appear within the church. Jesus says, "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, "I am the Christ," and will deceive many." Every so often you hear of some charismatic leader who claims he is Jesus and leads a great number of people astray. Sun Yun Moon, the founder of the Unification Church claims that he is the Christ. A number of years ago David Koresh in Waco, Texas claimed he was the Christ.

There will also be persecution of believers. We have seen that around the world for centuries and now we see that beginning to take shape in our own country as those opposed to the Lord and to any mention of the name of Jesus are openly fighting to silence the message and the name of Jesus. Jesus said, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because

of me.” As we see these things happening in our own country today, it should not surprise nor alarm us. This is all fulfillment of the signs that Jesus said will accompany the last days.

During this time we can also expect that many will turn away from the faith. As Jesus said, “many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.” (v. 10) We see many churches dying and people turning away from the truth of God’s Word. At a workshop I attended last year a speaker noted that in the United States today on an average 8 churches are closing every week. Another reason some are leaving churches is because those churches are no longer proclaiming the Word of God. Jesus said, “many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.” (v. 11) How many preachers today are telling people how they should live rather than proclaiming to people that they have a Savior who lived, died and rose for them. How many preachers are ignoring Jesus Christ and telling people that they have to save themselves and can do so by their own lives? How many churches don’t we hear today that are calling sinful life styles ok and blessing people who have chosen to live in open rebellion to the will of God? Jesus also said that “the Gospel of the kingdom would be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.” (v. 14) We have seen that happen. Now with the internet and other means of communication, this good news of Jesus is being spread worldwide.

WHAT DO THESE SIGNS MEAN FOR US

The signs of the last days are all around us. In every generation these signs are fulfilled. In fact, when Jesus told his followers about all these signs, he concluded his comments with these words, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” (v. 34) By the end of the first century all the signs of the end had been fulfilled. They have been fulfilled and are being fulfilled in our lifetime before our very eyes. Why? So that we will read the signs and understand the times in which we are living.

As you and I read the signs and know what they mean, Jesus says to us, “Don’t be frightened and alarmed by what you see happening.” All these things need to take place. They remind us that we need to be ready because we never know when that day will come. However, we do know that all the signs pointing to that day are being fulfilled before our very eyes. It also reminds us that we need to be diligent in getting the Word out to more and more people about Jesus, the Savior of the whole world. The reason that God has not ended this world yet is because as Peter writes, “The Lord is patient with you not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9b)

God’s great love for us has caused you and me to love others. God’s great gift of his Son and the gift of the faith we have in Jesus causes us to be giving to others so that the Word of Forgiveness and Life can be spread throughout the world.

Amen.

GIVING NEVER EMPTIES YOUR HAND Proverbs 11:24, 25, 28 & 30

During the past four weeks you have seen inserts in your bulletins and have received two mailings which have focused our attention on this thought that “Loving never empties your heart nor giving, your hand.” This is the theme of our 2005 Stewardship Emphasis. In our previous devotion we were told to read the signs. The signs of the end of the world are all around us and have been around for almost 2,000 years. The reason that God has not ended this world yet is that there still are people that need to hear about Jesus and come to faith in him. This is a task that the Lord has given to each and every one of us to be his witnesses in this world where he places us. None of us can do this by ourselves. We need one another. We also need missionaries and others who will go to places where you and I cannot go. We support their work with our generous and cheerful offerings.

Often when the topic of money comes up in the church, we grab our wallets and hang on for dear life. We aren't so quick to open our wallets and give freely and generously of what God has entrusted to our management. Why is that? Our basic nature is selfish. We think of ourselves first before we think of someone else. Solomon in the book of Proverbs encourages you and me to be generous in our giving to others.

Solomon writes, “One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly and comes to poverty.

A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.” (Proverbs 11:24-25) Solomon cites a truth that our Lord Jesus also stated, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35c) Our logic says that if I give away my money, then I will have less for myself. God's logic says, you give freely and you will gain even more. Now does that mean that if I give more money then I will have more money? It may. But not always. It may also mean that you will receive many other blessings from the Lord. As we give and help others, we also are helped. How many times haven't we seen someone who gave freely of their money, time and abilities to others throughout their lives and then when they were in need, they were well taken care of because others were now able to show their appreciation and gratitude for all the help that person had given in their life.

During this past year the members of this congregation have responded by giving freely and generously of their wealth to the Lord. By the grace of God we have been able to retire all debts that this congregation had taken upon itself during the last decade. Some of that has come from undesignated memorials that members left to this congregation upon their death. But the members of this congregation have increased their offerings by 7% over what we gave in 2004. What does that mean? It means that at the end of October we had given to the Lord \$47,300 more for the operations of this congregation than we had given in 2004. It means that we had given at the end of October \$9,854 more for mission and \$6,000 more for Lakeside Lutheran High School than we did the previous year. To God

be the praise for opening your heart and mine to give freely and generously. You may have noticed in the Messenger that you received this past week that our operating receipts were almost \$138,000 short of our expenses for 2005. We pray that God will continue to open the hearts of more and more of us to increase our offerings so that we can meet our obligations.

Why do we want to do this? To keep our church afloat? NO! We do this because God has given us the best gift of all. He gave us his Son Jesus and he has given us faith in that Savior. We want to spread this good news to more and more people so that many more may have the same peace and assurance that we have. We have the peace of forgiveness and a right relationship with God. We have the certainty of an eternal home in heaven with Jesus and all the saints.

It is as Solomon says in our reading. "Whoever trusts in his riches will fall; but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise." We don't put our confidence and trust in our money. We place our confidence in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord who has promised to take care of us in all our needs. We also want to win souls for our Lord because that is why we exist as a Christian congregation. That is the assignment our Lord gave us just before he returned to his throne in heaven. We are to be his witnesses. We are to use the resources he gave us, our time, talents and money to spread the Good News. And we remember that loving never empties our heart nor will giving ever empty our hands.

Amen.