

### **Mark 13:32-37**

*'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'*

Back in high school I took a summer job that had me driving all around the San Francisco Bay Area. One afternoon that summer, while driving the long highway home, I did something which now strikes me as unthinkable: I picked up a hitchhiker. Confession: these were simpler times, and he wasn't my first. I can't recall our exact words but I do remember the talk turning at some point to the sad state of world affairs in that year, 1972. The hitchhiker began to recount a litany of current disasters, global chaos and other dire phenomenon foretelling certain doom to America, if not the world.

I was young in my Christian walk and full of the faith, hope and love of Jesus. Predictably, I grew weary listening to this shotgun prophet preaching from the bully pulpit of my passenger seat. When I could take it no longer, I blurted out what I believed was a hopeful statement—or at least a way to shut him up: “Well, that’s okay because Jesus is coming back soon and none of this will matter then anyway.” He kept on talking.

I believe in—and long for—the return of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Like most Christians, it’s one of the deepest hopes I carry around in my heart. Especially now in 2020. In fact, ever since Jesus left this earth, pretty much every generation of believers has been expecting him to come back in *their* lifetime. Some of these lifetimes have flirted with End Time visions more perilous than others. Those who lived through World War II had every right to imagine that Jesus was coming back soon. Ditto those who experienced the Great Depression. World War I, merging at it’s close with the Spanish Flu pandemic, was another leading candidate for the Second Coming. So far we’re only going back one century. Let’s not forget the Civil War, the French Revolution, the Revolutionary War, the Black

Plague and on and on and on. And that's only Western civilization. When you think about it, in terms of human eras being catastrophic enough to warrant Jesus' return, even our COVID-19 pandemic has heavy competition throughout our history.

Despite limited lifespans, all of us somehow believe that *our* turbulent years are the most epic that have ever been. Certainly, we assume, they're momentous enough to mandate Jesus' immediate return from heaven to earth! At this point, however, nearly fifty years after my ignored statement to that hitchhiker, I've come to believe that "Second-Coming theologies" run the risk of producing lazy Christians. That is, if Jesus is coming soon, what need have we to assist God in changing the world for the better? If Christ's return is imminent, and a New Jerusalem, New Heaven and Earth are just around the corner, why bother with repair work? We're getting a whole new car soon—let's not waste money replacing bald tires.

Frankly, though I pine for Jesus' return, the best way to prepare for the Second Coming is to live as if it's a long ways off, or as if it may not happen in our lifetime at all. And anyway, the world's needs never go on vacation in Jesus' absence. Why then should we leave for a holiday from our faith? There have always been, and are still now, mouths to feed, bodies to clothe, families to shelter, justice to carry out, nations to reconcile, air and oceans and lands to heal, God's compassion and consolation to distribute with abandon. And diseases to cure.

Micah 6:8 declares: *"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*

Micah's words seem written as a question to ponder. Actually they're a statement of what we are to *do*, day-in, day-out, pandemic or no pandemic, temptation to end-times laziness notwithstanding. The justice, kindness and humble walking of Micah 6:8 is what we Christians do. We have always been called to do it, ever since Jesus departed our world to be with the Father, leaving behind his trustworthy Holy Spirit to strengthen, comfort and guide us. Until his eventual return.

Yes, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are still in an unprecedented pandemic, stubborn and deadly as ever. Yes, each new day we get new headlines that cause us shock and awe and grief. Yes, politics and businesses and schooling and medicine and everything else are out of whack. But despite all that, each of us knows someone in need of something we have to give. Beyond the statistics, there are real live neighbors God has appointed for us to serve.

So choose your form of grace and boldly give it away. An encouraging phone call to an isolated loved one. Diapers for a friend's new baby. A donation that changes a life. A drive-thru blessing for a mission partner. Gatorade for the homeless in the canyons. Calm conversation talking someone down from the same ledge they talked you down from last week. A prayer, lifting up to God the care of a fellow traveler.

So it turns out that Jesus *has* returned. Not visibly, but surely in every silent, gracious moment where we act in love, and so testify to his abiding presence. Our Lord *has* been with us 'lo these many months. And God will continue standing by our side until this pandemic ends—and beyond.

I leave with you an offering of love from La Jolla Presbyterian Church that, for lack of originality, we're calling "Pandemic Relief." If you go to the link [ljpres.org/sunriseofhope2019](http://ljpres.org/sunriseofhope2019), you will find a variety of mental health videos, blogs, classes, events and information, all of them laced with the presence of Jesus. And for those still convinced that the Lord *will* return in their lifetime, feel free to consider each item on the link a "Jesus sighting." Either that, or be yourself the face of Jesus that someone else sees.

*Heavenly Father, though we don't know when the pandemic will end, and even less when the world's woes will cease, we wait for your return and we know that you are the same gracious God yesterday, today and always. Shower your presence on us now, that we might in turn shower your presence on another human being in need of your help. And until you come again at the close of the age—whenever that is— for the sake of those around us, strengthen us to continue doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with you. For we pray it in the name of our everlasting Lord and Savior Jesus, whose presence we experience daily, Amen.*