

“Watchful Thinking” – Pr Jim Sprengle – New Year’s Eve 2024

- I. **Luke 12:35-40** – previous read
- II. **Let the countdown begin!**
 - a. I don’t know about you, but each New Year’s Eve I have one foot in the past and one foot in the future... it’s a little difficult to be present in the moment.
 - i. Usually, the reflection we do looks over the past year – what the highs and lows were ... what challenges and successes experienced.
 - ii. For some, the last year was wonderful... maybe the people you love had a great year, or you had many positive experiences.
 1. We might look back and see babies born, baptisms, marriages, new homes purchased, careers taking off, young people being confirmed, great vacations, and clean bills of health.
 - iii. On the other hand, the last year may have had its fair share of struggles.
 1. We might look back and remember babies lost through miscarriages, grandchildren and great grandchildren whose parents do not care about baptizing them, divorces, homes lost to financial trials, careers ending because of layoffs, teenagers who don’t want to go through confirmation, vacations put off because of family problems, and health challenges, or even the death of a loved one.
 - b. Maybe you’ve heard the Cambridge Dictionary’s word of the year for 2024?
 - i. The word of the year is manifest.
 - ii. The meaning of words change all the time, but we see that word in the Bible sometimes as meaning something revealed clearly.
 1. When something manifests, it is being brought out in the open.
 2. For example, 1 Peter 1 points to Jesus who shows Himself, “²⁰ [Jesus] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you ²¹who through Him are believers in God.” (1 Peter 1:20-21)
 3. And also, in 1 Corinthians, this word is used to describe our works as Christians, “Each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day [of Judgment] will disclose it...” (1 Corinthians 3:13)
 - iii. Going back to the new understanding of manifest in the world of TikTok and influencers like Simone Biles the Olympic gymnast and others – it’s now, “to imagine achieving something you want, in the belief that doing so will make it more likely to happen.”
 1. The idea is to think about your success daily in whatever you want to achieve by a special schedule that these influencers promote... and a good result will “manifest.”

2. Even secular psychologists criticize this as “magical thinking” because simply imagining good things doesn’t make them happen.¹
 3. To me, it sounds a lot like wishful thinking.
- c. Going back to that long list of heartaches and trials in the lives of some of us last year, no amount of wishful thinking would have changed these results.
- i. Sitting down three times a day and envisioning the baptism of your grandchild will not manifest itself through an actual baptism.
 - ii. Fantasizing about a marriage full of romance, constant love and attention toward each other doesn’t make it happen.
 - iii. Dreaming about finding a great job after a layoff is not helpful.
 - iv. Thinking about a reconciliation with estranged family members does not bring people together in forgiveness.
 - v. Believing that our loved ones will be healthy does not always mean they will not face health problems or, even pass away.
- d. It’s not that positive thinking is a problem... it’s the focus... where are we putting our trust?

III. **Jesus makes Himself the focus in our Gospel reading tonight.**

- a. The beginning of this chapter of Luke prior to our reading is Jesus warning His followers about the dangers of life’s distractions – especially goods and possessions – as He brings their attention to the Last Day and being ready for His coming... as He manifests Himself in glory.
- b. He begins with a parable about the master returning from attending a wedding banquet, which may go on for three days in ancient times.
- i. As the servants are left to manage the house and property, the master might come back at any time of the day or night.
 1. Will he find them slacking off, sleeping, or as the saying goes, “when the cat’s away the mice will play”?
 2. Will he find them awake, lamps burning, and ready to welcome the master home?
 - ii. The strange part is that the master, if they are prepared for him, will turn the tables so to speak and serve them when he arrives.
- c. In the second parable, Jesus points out that He will return with a suddenness that will take people by surprise... just like we are shocked when a thief steals something from us.
- i. The Son of Man, a phrase Jesus uses for Himself, is going to come back at an hour you do not expect... so the message is, “be ready!”
 - ii. In other words, let watchful thinking be ingrained in your mind.
- d. The temptation is to sit back and hope good things will happen in a world of sin and death... a world troubled by satan’s attacks.
- i. We can try all kinds of positive thinking techniques, or hope for the best, but the true power remains in Christ.

- IV. **Jesus Christ is worthy** of all our thinking and energy because of His love.
- a. As Romans testifies – Nothing... “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (vs 39)
 - i. Jesus came into our world with the purpose of showing (manifesting) Himself as the Savior – which happened from the day of His birth and the angel announcement to the shepherds... to the many miracles throughout His ministry... including the Transfiguration... and even dying on a cross.
 - 1. Yes, the cross may seem like a far cry from glory... but it was the ultimate act of love... because by His sacrifice, WE WIN.
 - 2. Sin, death, and satan were defeated... and they have no real power over us, as Jesus conquered them in His death and soon after, His resurrection and Ascension into heaven.
 - 3. The love Jesus came to give us is the victory over all things that might separate us from Him – and our victory will be fully realized on the Last Day as He brings it all to completion.
 - b. You may be confident that Jesus never sat around trying to manifest things out of positive thinking or wishful thinking – He brought about the salvation of the world through His actions of word and deed.
- V. **As Christ followers, our words, deeds**... and thoughts focus on our Savior.
- a. It is never wishful thinking or magical thinking to turn our thoughts and prayers to the Lord and His will for others.
 - i. We may not know how God will work through it, but we trust that He is in control, not us.
 - ii. So we pray with confidence, as any child might turn to a good father for help and the longings of our hearts... and He promises to hear us.
 - b. But more than prayers, a Christian is also willing to take action if possible.
 - i. Children and teens who are not interested in Baptism or Confirmation may be encouraged through cards, or a conversation with a pastor.
 - ii. Divorces and family division might be changed by reaching out to support and encourage forgiveness with God’s help.
 - iii. And, when health problems hit or even a death occurs, we don’t walk alone, but lean into the body of Christ as they support us.
 - iv. Certainly, our actions don’t always result in the answers we seek, but the Lord is always working... so our work is not in vain.
 - c. Watchful thinking is Christ-centered thinking, and it constantly reminds us of who we are, and we don’t have forever to live out our Christian walk.
 - d. As we look to the New Year, let us not place our hope in wishful thinking or fleeting resolutions, but in the sure and steadfast promises of Christ our Lord—who came to manifest His love, who works through us even now, and who will one day return in glory to bring His victory to completion.
 - e. Stay ready, stay faithful, and stay watchful, because in Christ, the best is yet to come! Amen