Mark 13:6 & 9a Jesus said to them: ‘Watch out that no one deceives you…You must be on your guard.

Most of us know the story of the boy who cried wolf. Sometimes though, those who cry out warnings are not boys who cry wolf, rather they are people with genuine warnings about real dangers. Such is the case in the history of Pennsylvania. Had people heeded the warnings that were given, one of America’s worst natural disasters may have been avoided.

The problem started in the year 1880 when the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club of Pittsburg began the reconstruction of an old earthwork dam which formed Lake Conemaugh, the site of the club. The dam would create a lake 3 miles long, 60-65 feet deep, a mile wide at spots, and covering 500 acres of land. Despite the fact that this dam would make such an enormous lake, never once did the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club employ or consult a trained geologist or engineer. From the day the repairs on the dam were started the cry of many people was that it was a disaster waiting to happen.

In concern the Cambria Iron Company of Johnstown sent its geologist and engineer to report on the dam. In 1880 even before the dam was finished that engineer concluded the dam to be totally unsafe. But no one listened. Now, the dam did have a sluice gate which could be opened and water drained but it was inadequate. And once the dam was finished and the Club stocked the lake with fish they didn’t want their fish swimming away and so an iron grate was place over dam side opening of the sluice pipe to keep the stocked fish in. Local floods in 1885, 87 and 88 all brought warning cries of danger. But by this time, people were convinced the dam would not break and that all who gave warning were just a bunch of kooks. No one realized how that iron grate over the sluice pipe was being clogged with debris and becoming totally useless.

On May 30th, 1889 the kooks were proved right. The South Fork dam did break because of heavy rains, and sent a wall of water 30 to 40 foot high, traveling at around 40 miles an hour down the valley of the Little Conemaugh river valley. The town of South Fork, Mineral Point, East Conemaugh, and Johnstown were hit. The end result was over 2200 dead and 960 missing. Of the dead, 396 were children ten years old or younger. The flood left 98 orphans, 124 widows, and 198 widowers. Perhaps the most tragic fact is that 99 families were completely annihilated. That was just the cost in human lives. The costs in property losses no one has ever been able to completely estimate other than to say it was in the millions of dollars.

The Johnstown flood of 1889 was a horrid disaster which could have been avoided if people would have just listened and acted. Yet I fear that the Johnstown flood, or any disaster since then, will be nothing compared to the day that is yet coming. The day that I am referring to is the one that is warned of in our text. It is a day known as Judgment Day.

For some, that is for believers of the world, Judgment Day will be a day of glory and wonder when Jesus Christ finally returns to the world to cleanse it of sin and restore it to the perfection it was created with. For believers the Day of Judgment will mark the beginning of their existence in the glorious kingdom of God. From that point of view the day will be a day of utter joy and amazement!

But for the unbelievers of the world, for those who reject Jesus Christ as God and Lord, the Day of Judgment will be the worst disaster this world will ever know. Millions, or should I say billions of souls will find themselves in the eternal torments and fires of hell. There will be no escape, no relief, no comfort or peace of any kind. These souls will end up in Hell and they have no one to blame but themselves for God has given ample warning that the Day is coming!

So that we might remind ourselves of the fact that the Day of Judgment is coming, so that we might once again hear the words of warning that Jesus gave us, let’s look at our text and consider it under this theme: **BE ON YOUR GUARD!**

Please note that our text is the result of Jesus’ disciples marveling at the beauty of the town of Jerusalem. That fact is found in verse 1-4 that we did not hear today. How stunned the disciples were when Jesus told them that there would come a time and soon, when **“not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.”** That you might know that Jesus knew what He was talking about those words came true in 70 A.D. when the armies of Rome utterly leveled Jerusalem, including the complete destruction of the Temple.

It was Jesus’ prophecy about Jerusalem that prompted his disciples to seek more information, specifically more information about the end of the world. To those inquiries Jesus gave the following signs concerning the end of the world.

Sign one. **“Many will come in my name, claiming, I am He, and will deceive many.”** The sign here is that the world will be filled with all kinds of false teachers and prophets. These teachers and prophets will be false because instead of clinging to the truth of God’s Word, they will twist and contort the Word of God to suit their own desires (2 Ti 4:3). Or another way of describing what they will do is found for us in 2 Tim 3:1-9. We are told things like: **“having a form of godliness but denying its power…they…are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires…these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.”** All one needs to do is search the New Testament for all the warnings and sections on false teachers and prophets and you will grasp what Jesus was speaking of.

I can think of several examples of how these words have already come true. Do you have any idea how many main line denominations no longer accept the Bible as God’s Word? Or how many actually deny the physical resurrection of Jesus? Seriously, there are really only a few that actually still believe the Bible to be God’s inspired word. Or how many churches simply teach moralism, that God sent his Son to show us how to be good and live our lives. Not long ago an article came across my social media page, and it might have been a repeat from last year, showing a groups of religious leaders, most supposedly Christian, all gathered together to bless an abortion clinic. Not far from here there is a church with this message on its sign: “God loves you as you are.” That message suggests that you don’t have to repent, you don’t have to stop your sins because God is going to accept you anyway. It is not true! I could go on and on with how this world is now filled with false teachers and preachers. I believe this prophecy is now true.

Sign two: **“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.”**

I don’t think much explanation needs to be given as to this sign. There has never been a period of history without a war or the threat of war going on, always for some reason. Since the basic nature of man hasn’t changed, this sign will continue among us. The same can be said for the earthquakes, famines and as Matthew tells us, the other natural disasters which will occur. If you are like me, you grasp that since our childhoods these things seem to be more frequent and fierce as time goes on. These things simply mark the beginning of the end. They are indeed going on today.

Sign three: **“You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.”** And a bit later on: **“Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.”** Here is one of those signs that was fulfilled in the disciples’ days and continues to be fulfilled even today. Most of the disciples and early Christians were killed for their belief and today, in many parts of the world, thousands of Christian are martyred every year. Isn’t it true that in the world today there are Christian issues that are being debated and that cause division: abortion, euthanasia, creation / evolution, and a hundred other Christian issues? The sad part is that in today’s climate, Christians seem to be losing these battles. The warning is still before us: **“You must be on your guard!”** Don’t let the opportunity for you to speak the truth of God’s Word to our world go by. And please, stick to the truth of God’s Word! There is no doubt that these words have been fulfilled.

Sign four: **“The gospel must first be preached to all nations.”** What is the Gospel? It is the good news of Jesus Christ and his gift of eternal salvation given by grace through faith. The gospel is the heart and core of Christianity that is founded on the resurrection of Jesus and revealed in the absolute truth of God’s Word. It is not the gospel just to preach from the Bible, but to hear the specific message of sin and Jesus as your Savior from sin. Here I would have to say that I am not sure that the gospel has been preached throughout the world, but I do think it is close to being fulfilled. Luther once remarked that if people really wanted Jesus to return, then they would get out there and preach the Gospel. Wise words.

Sign five. Please note that sign five is really found in verses 12-13, verses we didn’t hear in our reading. They say, **“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”**

Here is perhaps the saddest of all the warning signs that Jesus gave, for it is this sign more than others that foretells what depth of despair this world will come to. Since the day this sign was given, actually, since the day of the fall into sin, the world is in the process of fulfilling it. One only needs to take a good look at your news feeds to grasp that this is coming true. People have forgotten what love and living in love is all about. We now have to post notes like: “Just because I disagree with you does not mean I hate you…we need to learn to be civil again.” The spat of mass killings as recently happened in Pittsburg, and since this sermon was written Florida, generated entirely by hatred, now seems to be the norm for our world. Our homes are in disarray, our social fabric is being torn apart, indeed, I would argue that even common decency and the simple practice of self-control is pretty much being abandoned. Think about this, as a state we are even being asked to vote on whether or not we want a drug, that many consider absolutely dangerous, to be more readily available to the people!

Most important are the last words of warning: **“All men will hate you because of me.”** The world will be and is hostile to the message of Jesus Christ and the Bible. To speak of sin, to challenge the lives of people to follow God, to seek repentance, to believe in Jesus…these things men hate to hear. Don’t let it surprise you when you see that the Christian church is declining and don’t let this truth cause you to forget to stand firm in God’s Word.

Now, why on this day of Reformation should we spend time speaking of these signs of the end of the age? Well, it was the reading that was before us, that’s the first reason. But it is the reading before us because if anything it reminds you that the truth needs to be fought for and stood up. It is the history of the Reformation. Where would we be had not the blessings of Luther and his confidence in God’s Word not been successful? Yes, we need to be on guard and be ready to stand for the simple truth of Jesus.

But finally, the reason for such a text is because the end will come. I don’t know when it will come, but I do know it will come. Jesus gave us these words that we might be prepared for when the end comes and the only way to be prepared is through faith in Jesus Christ, God’s Son and our Savior.

In other words, it is an opportunity to simply extend the call to faith. God has sent His Son. Jesus has died and rose from the dead for us and our salvation. His victory is ours, a victory founded on his Word and the marvel of His gospel message. Trust Jesus. And when you see these signs happening, as I believe I am beginning to see, then know all the more that Jesus was and is right. Know all the more then that Jesus is the Savior and as such we have nothing to worry about. Faith says, “Jesus died and rose for me.” Faith says, “God’s Word is the foundation of Christian faith backed by the power of Jesus.” Faith says, “In Jesus, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, I will not fear, for you are with me, your rod and staff comfort me.” Be on Guard in Jesus. Amen.