

Matthew 24.15-28
Third Last Sunday
11 November 2018
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Here we are. Some 49 Sundays into the church year.

It all started last year on the First Sunday of Advent. Early December 2017. During those first weeks of the church year until Christmas, we follow the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus of the anticipation of the faithful. The Lord Jesus of the first proclamation of the Gospel, the curse over Satan, "He shall crush your head." The Lord Jesus to whom all the sacrifices of the temple pointed. Of whom the Passover Lamb was a pale reflection. Unto whom all the Law and the prophets prophesied. The Lord Jesus who hadn't yet, but would, come through Virgin Mother: "Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son, and she shall His name Immanuel."

And then comes Christmas. The birth in your flesh and mine of the Savior of the world! The sin-bearer! And from that point on in the church year we follow His life in the flesh. His life of love; His death for the sin of the world; His resurrection for the life of the world.

But today we enter another mini-season. The Last Sundays. Three in total. From now till the end of November.

And every single one of them, they teach one thing: the work of the Lord Jesus isn't done yet. And they all implore you: do not take that to be a trifling thing, or something to be trifled with.

Why? Because just as certain as the Lord Jesus comes to you right now, today, through His Word and Sacrament, so certainly will He come in glory with the whole host of heaven.

Just as the time of grace is now, so will the time of grace be ended.

Just as there will be acquittal pronounced over the faithful on the Last Day, so certain will the final word of condemnation come down like a hammer the unfaithful.

And just as certain as heaven is real, so is hell. That's the point of Jesus' morbid proverb at the end of His speech: "Wherever the corpse, there the vultures will gather." You can't have one without the other.

But whoever you are who hear those words and shrug your shoulders—hear me loud and clear: the hammer of judgment awaits you. As sure as the real Jesus was born in the real town of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. As sure as the real Jesus was raised by a real carpenter named Joseph and his real wife Mary in the real town of Nazareth. As sure as the real Jesus was crucified under the real Pontius Pilate to pay the price for the sin of the world—just as surely is the real Jesus, the Son of God, really returning in glory. You don't get to sing "From Heav'n Above to Earth I Come" if you're unwilling to sing "The Day Is Surely Drawing Near," too.

But the glorious return of the Lord Jesus won't cause you to rejoice.

Instead, you'll melt in fear.

If today you choose to whistle by the metaphorical graveyard of the Last Day.

If today you neglect His Word.

If today you're fitting all this talk of the Lord's return into the narrative trajectory of some Never Never Land in your head, as in, "It ain't gonna happen" ...

Then you already stand under judgment. And what awaits you is not just death. But eternal death. Not just a resurrection. But a resurrection to everlasting hell.

Not just a self-imposed separation from God in the here and now, but an eternal separation imposed by the Almighty Himself.

And as long as you will not repent, you're choosing and sealing your own fate.

So, for the love of God, repent. And put your self-imposed separation from God aside.

Because against this fate, you have a Helper. Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus Christ Himself, who bore your sins on the tree. Jesus Christ Himself, whose resurrection gives life and eternal life. Jesus Christ Himself, who wants to acquit and not condemn when He returns. Jesus Christ who will cut short the time of trial and tribulation for the sake of the elect.

That's the gist and thrust of everything you'll hear today and the next two Sundays: Jesus is returning. To judge. With an unswerving judgment. But He wants to save you. In fact, He has saved you. By spilling His holy precious blood for you.

In other words, the Christ has already completed the work of the Christ.

That's what all that mouthful of polysyllabic words, this mysterious talk about the abomination of desolation, has to do with.

It all goes back to a prophecy in Daniel chapter 9. There Daniel mentions that the abomination of desolation will be visited on Jerusalem. Jesus picks that up here. It hasn't yet been fulfilled. But in 37 short years it will be. The Roman emperor Titus will storm Jerusalem. Tear down its walls. Lay it waste. And that will be the end of ancient Jerusalem and the temple.

But here's the thing: just prior to the abomination of desolation in Daniel's prophecy, this is what he says: "An anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing."

Jesus is pointing to the impending destruction of Jerusalem to point to His own death. Because this is how it works: if the abomination of desolation comes, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ, must already have been crucified. More pointedly: once you see the abomination of desolation, you must know that the work of Christ in redeeming the world from sin and death has been completed. So you're supposed to ask yourself: has the abomination of desolation come? Yes. And that means that the Messiah has rendered His sacrifice for the sins of the world. As indeed He has.

And so Jesus connects His own death with His own return to judge in one great arc. The Son of Man whose coming will flash from the East as far as the West—that's the same Anointed One who died

before Titus destroyed Jerusalem. And the time between those two great events—the crucifixion of the Son of God and His return—that’s the end time. In Daniel’s prophecy he calls it the last week of a 70-week period. Not a literal 70-week period. But a figurative one. Which is to say: *the end times aren’t coming, they’re here. And you live in them right now.*

Oh, I know, we’re all concerned about when the “real end” is coming.

But Jesus’ words today tell us, in a sense, to mind our own business. All you need to know is that He’s coming. All you need to know is that just as He cut short the time of the abomination of desolation for the elect, so will He cut the end time short for the sake of the elect.

Because as dangerous as were the times of the abomination of desolation, equally dangerous is the end time.

Because the abomination of desolation has occurred, that means that the Christ has done His work of redemption. And what that means is that many anti-Christ’s will arise.

And that’s the world we live in.

Now, what does the word “anti-Christ” conjure up for you? Often I think people hear that prefix “anti” and they think “someone or something who sets himself *against* Christ.” So we easily go to things and people and movements that antagonistically *oppose* Christ.

But being an anti-Christ is a far more subtle thing. Because “anti” in Greek doesn’t mean “against,” it means “in the place of.” It doesn’t mean overtly opposed to, it means *pretending to have won and to give and offer the same things that Christ has*. It means putting oneself forward as the ultimate good. Sometimes it might mean saying, “I’m actually the Christ.” But far more often it’s far more subtle.

And it’s all around you.

Because anything that offers itself to you as your ultimate good—that thing wants to turn itself into Christ for you. To be an ersatz-Christ. A replacement Christ.

And those things fill our world. We conceive of our ultimate good as a prosperous career. As financial security. As a life given over to whatever we love doing. As a retreat to the bottom of a bottle of whiskey. As happiness—whatever that might mean to us at the time.

The fact of the matter is, anything or anyone can become and be an anti-Christ. Because an anti-Christ is simply whatever you stake all your hopes on.

What’s yours?

Whatever it is, Jesus is telling you, don’t heed its siren voice.

For there is one Christ and one Christ alone. And you have that one Christ and that one Christ alone only in His Word and Sacrament. When the siren call of the anti-Christ’s calls to you and says, “Here! Here I am! I am your ultimate good!” You retreat to the Divine Service, where the real Christ comes. When the anti-Christ draws you out to the wilderness, you retreat to the water of your Baptism, where you put on the real Christ. When the siren song of the anti-Christ calls out, “Eat, drink, and be merry! That’s your

highest good. For tomorrow you die," you retreat to the Meal He instituted for you to eat and to drink...and to show for the death of the real Christ until the real Christ comes again in glory.

Because He is coming again in glory. For you, the elect, He will cut short these days. Only remain in Him, the one true Christ.

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