

Matthew 24.15-28; 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18; Job 14.1-6
3rd-Last Sunday of the Church Year
7 November 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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

If you were to count the Sundays in Lent—those Sundays from Ash Wednesday leading up to Easter and even including Easter—you'd find that there are 7 of them.

In the ancient church, Advent, too, was 7 Sundays long. It included the 4 Sundays of what we now call Advent. Along with the 3 last Sundays of the church year. I don't know how that fell out of fashion. But it makes all the sense in the world. For beginning today our entire focus from now till Christmas is the coming of the Lord, with the last 3 Sundays of the church year focused on His coming again in glory to judge the quick and the dead.

And for that reason, both seasons are penitential seasons. Lent, from Ash Wednesday on, focuses you on your great sin that caused the death of the Son of God. Advent, from this Sunday on, focuses you on preparing to stand before the judgment throne of God when Jesus will return with the wounds of Good Friday to stand in judgment over the world. Advent, from this Sunday on, focuses you on the greatest of penitential themes: *memento mori*—remember that you shall die. Advent, from this Sunday on, focuses you on what contemporary lingo would call “the challenges” of approaching the judgment. We might not be so euphemistic. How about insurmountable odds?

But somehow, we gotta get there, don't we? The judgment isn't yet. Christ's rescue is still coming. And yet we walk in danger all the way.

What's this time of danger like?

Let Job tell you. It's short. Tragically short. Flower-life-time short in the big sweep of things. With all the permanence of a shadow. This isn't a sweet shortness. It means that you come and you go. Once there wasn't a you walking the face of the earth, then there was, and then again there won't be. Ever again. And you have no control over that. The day of your death has been written by God Himself. He's laid down a limit. And you can't pass it. And then ... Whatever influence you've enjoyed? Gone. Whatever joys of life? Gone. Whatever hopes and expectations and aspirations? They evaporate 6' below the face of the earth.

But it's strange even to speak of joys. Job calls life full of trouble. And you know what that trouble is like. Sure, the little annoyances. But sometimes big trouble. Huge trouble. Existential trouble. Keep-you-awake-at-night trouble. Cause-you-to-be-physically-exhausted trouble. Emotionally and mentally drained. Not sure if you can get out of bed in the morning and, if you can, not sure you want to.

And then there's your sin. “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?” asks Job. You know that there's one reason and one reason only why life is solitary, poor, nasty, short, and brutish. It wasn't for Adam and Eve—at least until they fell into sin. But now you're stuck in a new place. With a God-written reminiscence of paradise, a longing for it, a knowledge that life shouldn't be like it is. And the utter inability to change it. For a clean thing cannot be brought out of an unclean. And you're unclean.

So the sufferings of this life are a sort of despair. A sort of hopelessness. It doesn't get better. As the years pass, the days get shorter because life gets shorter. Its end is always in view. And there's not a thing, not a single thing you can do to cross the limits set. Death is coming for you. And it's coming because you're a sinner. *Memento mori*.

Now look, you'd think that being in Christ would provide some sort of relief from this anxiety.

It doesn't. Not because of being in Christ, though, but because of what devil and world throw at you.

That's what Jesus is telling you today. If what Job describes sounds miserable, what Jesus describes sounds downright scary. Devil and world aren't going to take a break. In fact, in these gray and latter days they're going to be all the more active "so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." That's their whole purpose. But Jesus has a purpose, too. To tell you these things before they happen so that you will not be led astray.

Now look, all of this has been going on since our Lord Jesus ascended into heaven. Within 40 years of our Lord's ascension, in AD 70, pagan Roman occupiers had desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem, setting up a statue of a man in the place devoted to the worship of the One True God. The incense of the evening and morning sacrifices were now offered to a deified man. Jerusalem, the earliest home of the Holy Christian Church, was laid waste. Nursing mothers had their infants torn from their arms and driven through with a sword in front of their very eyes, pregnant mothers had their infants cut from their wombs, and the only ones who survived survived without a possession left to their name.

And it just hasn't stopped. The abomination of desolation goes right on. False doctrine plagues the Church of Christ and tears the fabric of the Church to shreds. It's not just Buddhists and Muslims, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, who offer a false salvation. That's the abomination of desolation. It's that false schemes of salvation riddle the Church. That's the abomination of desolation in the holy place.

"It all depends on your decision!" cry the false prophets, though He Himself said, "It is not that you have chosen Me, but I have chosen you" (John 15.16).

"You must add works to what Christ has already done!" the false prophets cry, though He Himself has said, "By grace are you saved through faith, and this not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2.8-9).

"The only way to find Christ is in an emotional high!" they say, though He's told us exactly where He may be found—in His Holy Word and Blessed Sacraments (Luke 10.16; Luke 22.19; Galatians 3.27)—and that "In this world you will have tribulation" (John 16.33).

And their words—they're accompanied by great signs. Their congregations grow by leaps and bounds while the true Church of Christ on earth languishes. But such is life under the true Cross.

Justin Bieber and Kanye West sing their songs. Impressive! While the true Church continues to prepare herself for her song in heaven by singing her own song on earth.

Their church rolls are a virtual who's-who of the community, the go-getters, the successful and proud, the politicians and CEOs, while the true Church of Christ on earth gathers in the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for a righteousness they don't have, the merciful, those made pure in heart by the blood of Christ, the peacemakers, the persecuted, the reviled—for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Beloved in the Lord: do not be deceived by these things. But see them for what they are. For behold, Christ has told you beforehand.

They are signs that the end is at hand. They are not the end. The whole world seems to be coming apart at the seams. Christ's Church looks like a ragamuffin tossed in a corner. The pundits tell us the human population will soon overwhelm the world. That the way you live is going to usher in an apocalypse. That our country declines while China builds an economic powerhouse and the nuclear arsenal to go with it. And the prognosticators see forward to a day when Christianity is reduced to numerical insignificance.

But behold! Christ has told you all this beforehand. This is not the end. This is the sign the end is at hand.

The end is at hand. And Christ, your Savior, will return. Not in some long, drawn-out process. There's no millennium of waiting. No particular time of tribulation. You live in the tribulation now. And Christ comes to rescue you. No. When He comes, it will be like the lightning flashing from east to west. Quick as that. With a cry of command. With the voice of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God. You're not gonna miss it. Because you won't be able to miss it.

So do not despair. The times and seasons—they're in the Lord's hands, in His wisdom. The evil days we live in—they will not go on forever. Nor will they bring the collapse of everything you know. He'll continue to sustain and uphold His creation—and He'll do it for you. And He'll return at just the right time—at the time "cut short" for the sake of you, the elect.

So what's left for you to do?

Wait. In faith.

My little neighbor Morgan loves using our flashlights when she comes over. And I've started some seed in my yard. I suggested—as something to do—that she and I go inspect the seed. It was late afternoon. Not the brightest day ever, but also not dark, or even dusk. But we took the flashlights anyway on our inspection. When we shined them—powerful LED flashlights—they did absolutely nothing to illuminate the seedbeds. The day was still bright so the light cast by the flashlights was dim.

But beloved in the Lord: the hope and promise of Christ and His Word shines brighter the darker the days grow. In the waxing darkness of life, it stands out as singularly brilliant and bright that Jesus is returning.

That the Lord of heaven and earth, who became man to suffer for your sins and in your place—that that's the One who's coming back.

That the sins that keep you awake at night are just ghosts, phantoms, that have already found their permanent resting place in the grave of Christ.

That though you can't bring a clean thing out of an unclean, Christ can, and He has washed you in His own blood.

That though your life be short, nasty, and brutish, Jesus is risen from the dead, and in Him you'll rise to everlasting life—long, pleasant, and sublime.

That though His Church be rent asunder, He remains yesterday, today, and forever the same.

That in the cacophony of false doctrine spewed from the mouths of false prophets and false christ, His unsullied Word is still proclaimed in this darkening world.

That, fellow-redeemed, is the brilliance and brightness of Christ and His Word in the gloomy darkness of these gray and latter days.

May the good and gracious Lord preserve all of you in that faith to life everlasting.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

oremus: Heavenly Father, how abundant is your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You and worked for those who take refuge in You! (Ps. 31.19) Amen.

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