

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

St. Peter writes in the Epistle reading for today, “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.” God lays this out here before you showing the times in which you live. “The end of all things is at hand” or as you often hear this referred to, “the end times.” Since the ascension of Jesus into heaven and until he comes again on the Last Day the end times are at hand. So, what does this all mean? Well, God warns you about the time and who you are living in this world, yet he also comforts you as you live in the end days and look forward to the Last Day ushering in the new creation.

Jesus in the Gospel reading says to the disciples something similar in both a narrow way for them particularly and in a broad sense for the church of God now. Jesus said, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.”

The disciples heard these words of Jesus and were warned of what was to come. For them, they would see themselves put out of or literally “excommunicated” from the synagogues. Preaching Christ as the Messiah would bring about the ire of the Jews even as they crucified the Lord himself. And yes, they themselves would also be killed for the sake of Jesus all in the name of what their persecutors would think is good and godly. Yet when something is not of Christ, then the work is not good and godly rather it is far from it.

The warning for them and for you is the same, “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.” Jesus doesn’t want them to fall away from him as they experience these things. When things get amped up and they are getting thrown out of synagogues and being threatened he doesn’t want them to fall away. That’s the danger for Christians, for you, as you go through this life in these latter days. Falling away from the faith, falling away from Christ, is a very real thing and not some pie in the sky idea of “it could happen” but you don’t ever see it. No, it’s real, alright and it’s deadly. When you fall away from any other thing in life the consequences are not eternal. You fall away from schoolwork and your grades suffer. You fall away from practice for a sports team, and you won’t be as good as you could be or not get to play at all. You fall away from getting checked for your health and something treatable could go unnoticed and if serious enough could die sooner rather than later. But when someone falls away from Christ then everlasting suffering, condemnation, and hell are what is brought about.

I don’t have to tell many of you how real this is as you only have to look at your own friends and family and see all too well and tragically that yes, failing away from Christ is a real thing. Our sinful man and the devil though try to get us into a state of denial and not face these facts. We want to think, “well there’s still a spark there, he or she still believes, or he does such good things for people and cares so much.” But when we are honest with ourselves, we listen not to the voices of our fallen hearts but instead to the words of Jesus which bluntly tell us “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” and that’s just one example among many.

Jesus didn’t want his disciples to fall away, and he doesn’t want you to fall away either. Jesus never causes any one to fall away from the faith. Falling away, apostasy, is not God’s work, it is our own doing, and we are very good at what we do. As you hear these words, then, and think about your life God speaks to you to examine your life. God calls you to think about these things seriously because there’s nothing more serious. You are living in the end days and the days are short.

What does it look like to take this warning of Jesus seriously? Well, it’s a multifaceted thing but boils down to the fact that only Jesus keeps someone in the faith. Separate yourselves from Christ and you fall away. It’s really that simple when you get down to it, but we think it’s more complicated. We think our lives are somehow special and our

circumstances unique. But you know what? There's nothing new under the sun. The devil is still prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, resist him. Don't reach out your hand and try to feed or pet the roaring lion. Don't test or tempt God to see how far you can go in your life where you can stop hearing his word, stop receiving the Lord's Supper, stop coming to church, stop being hardened in your sin and thinking you don't need to repent of sin which God clearly calls sin. Don't do those things, it will never, ever, end well for you.

In the Epistle reading you heard, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." When you go out don't be surprised when you come across ideas, institutions, and people who hate Jesus. When times of trial come in these final days don't let them sway you into sin and away from Christ. The call of Jesus is a call to pick up your cross and follow him. As the voices grow louder and bolder against Christ and his church listen even more to the voice of the Good Shepherd and his words which have called you as his own Sheep.

The disciples would face these things even among the "religious" people of the day. They hated Jesus and his word. Today you most likely will not face these things in a synagogue like them but you will face them as Jesus and his word is despised in the temples and synagogues of the world which are found in the workplaces, businesses, schools, and places of government. Don't be surprised when you are ostracized, unfriended, and mocked all in the name of doing what their religion requires. What is so offensive, then, that they would do these things to the disciples and to you as well? It's the Gospel. That Christ would die for the sin of the whole world offends people and that there is salvation in no one else. It offends those who want to downplay sin and think they need no repentance. It also offends those who think there is a prerequisite before Jesus would forgive freely and fully.

All these things are around you, yet Jesus is preaching today, to you. Cling to those words the past few weeks where Jesus has said, "Take heart, be of courage, I have overcome the world." He is the Victor and on the final day all his enemies will be at his feet as he is ascended to the right hand of the Father and comes again to judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end. See all those things rather and remember who you are as baptized children of God which is what God calls all of us to do every day. Repent and crucify the old sinful flesh and things which want you to fall away and are actively attacking you. Instead let your lives confess the one who alone is good and gives eternal life and peace.

The words of Jesus today also give you comfort. As you see yourself you see the danger you walk in and the danger you are to yourself in so far as you are a sinner. But when you look to Christ and cling to him in faith you have something very different. Jesus said, "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning." You see, you are not alone in this world and left unprotected. The Holy Spirit is at work, and he bears witness about Christ. Jesus knew what the apostles and his church would face, and he also knew they would not be alone be his holy people.

That's the thing, then, in all of this and it all depends on Jesus doing it for you. You aren't left alone but the Holy Spirit is breathing out the word of God to you to hear and works the faith to believe it and give you what it says. As you go through this life you have the whole armor of God as your clothing which is to say you go through this life, through the end of all things, as the baptized people of God clothed with Christ. The church is eternal and in Christ you have eternal life. Take your eyes off Jesus and you see sin, death, and the devil all around you. Fix your eyes on Jesus, however, and hear the words of him who says, "I forgive you. You are mine and no one can snatch you out of my Father's hand." That's your help and comfort today dear people of God and God won't let you forget it you cling to Christ confessing your sin, hearing his word, receiving his Supper, and having Christ and salvation given to you.

And for those who have fallen away the Lord still speaks and calls them out. He is the one who is the Shepherd of the people. He is the one who has taken the sin of the whole world upon himself. He is the one who is also the compassionate Father of the prodigal son who rejoices and throws a feast of thanksgiving when the wayward son

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returns. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God's desire and pleasure is not for the death of the sinner but that he turn from his way and live. Even when people fall away, the Lord is still there to welcome them back with forgiving hands marked with the holes of the price he paid for their sin. His call is to return and seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon him while he is near. He is calling as his word goes out and he is near as he has promised at his ascension, "Behold I am with you always even to the end of the age." That's the message you confess to those who have fallen away. You warn them bluntly and do not mince words and you point them back to where redemption, eternal life, and peace are found in Christ alone as he gives it out in his church.

There's comfort today because Jesus is the faithful Son even as he is the eternal God himself. Jesus didn't fall away and baptized into Christ you have his faithfulness counted to you. Send the devil fleeing when he tries to lure you away. When sin entices you, look to Christ who gives eternal joy and pleasure beyond your comprehension even now and will last forever. When apathy tries to overtake you to think this stuff isn't a big deal or you really are fine when it comes to the things of God crucify those thoughts and replace them with the new heart and mind you have been given that loves the things of God and would stop at nothing to receive them. The life he gives you is way better and never ending. When death looms over your head face it as the one who has the victory for Jesus has destroyed death by his death and is risen from the dead proclaiming that you too will rise from your graves.

Dear saints of God this is your confession today, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Be bold in living this because Christ is yours and you are his. Take seriously the danger and warning of Christ for it is very real. Listen to the Helper, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit who gives you salvation and keeps you in it as you have Jesus crucified and risen for you. Cling to Christ and be at peace because he is faithful for you and to you. You are baptized into Christ, and he has acted for his name's sake to redeem you from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He has done it and holds you tightly under the shelter of his tent now and forever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.