

The Third to Last Sunday of the Church Year
St Matthew 24:15-28: "The Lord Has Mercy on His People."
November 11/12, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

Lord God, heavenly Father, we most heartily thank You that by Your Word You have brought us out of the darkness of error into the light of Your grace: We beseech You, mercifully help us to walk in that light, guard us from all error and false doctrine, and grant that we may not become ungrateful and despise and persecute Your Word, but receive it with all our heart, govern our lives according to it, and put all our trust in Your grace, through the merit of Your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 165)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the twenty-fourth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. / "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There He is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. / "So, if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6), dear fellow redeemed:

If somebody were to tell you that this church building will be demolished, taken apart piece by piece, until there is hardly a trace left, you would have a hard time believing it. What would ever bring on something like this? When would it happen? This is similar to how the disciples of Jesus responded when He told them the impressive temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed. The disciples had been commenting how wonderful the stones of the temple were and how beautiful the buildings. Didn't Jesus think so too? But He said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Lk. 21:6).

As soon as the disciples could talk to Jesus alone, they asked Him when these things would take place. He told them, “[W]hen you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near” (21:20). Then “the abomination of desolation” would be set up in the holy place of the temple, and great destruction would come upon the city and its inhabitants. The holy place in the temple is where sacrifices were made to the holy God for the sins of the people. But now in that sacred space, there would be an abomination set up for the purpose of tearing down.

I

Jesus said that Daniel had prophesied about this event hundreds of years before. We know Daniel for his God-given ability to interpret dreams and for his deliverance from the den of lions. But Daniel also wrote about future events in a style similar to St. John’s Revelation. He predicted the passing of power from the Babylonian Empire, to the Persian Empire, to the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great, and then to the Roman Empire.

He also foretold the coming of the Messiah, and said that “the abomination of desolation” would occur sometime after the Lord’s death. Then “the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary,” he wrote. “Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate” (Dan. 9:26-27).

These terrifying events are what Jesus now warned His disciples about. These things would come to pass, and sooner than they expected. His death was not far off at this point, which meant that the clock was ticking in Jerusalem. Awful terror and destruction were coming. I can imagine how the opponents of Jesus would have mocked Him if they heard what Jesus said. “The temple destroyed? Flee Jerusalem? You’re crazy!” This is probably what the unbelieving world thinks whenever we confess that Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead. “You think a God is coming down from the sky to judge us? You’re crazy!”

This will always be the response when people hear something they can’t make sense of or don’t want to face. They will simply ignore it and mock those who tell it. It happened in the days of Noah when he and his sons were building the Ark. For 120 years, they wore themselves out putting a boat together in the middle of nowhere, while their neighbors made fun of them, partied, and pursued their own plans and dreams. But then the rains fell and kept falling. The prophet Jeremiah told the Israelites that Jerusalem would be destroyed if they did not repent, and false teachers contradicted him telling the people, “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. There is peace!” But then the Babylonian army overwhelmed the city and enslaved the Israelites.

In the same way, people ignore the Word of God today and carry on as though they will never have to give an account of their actions before God. But they are wrong. Every person must “appear before the judgment seat of Christ,” and every person must answer for “what he has done in the body” (2Cor. 5:10). That is an uncomfortable thought. Our sins are so numerous and pervasive. We have not even come close to the righteousness that God requires.

But Jesus will not judge you and me on the basis of our sins. He will judge us on the basis of His righteousness. He clothed us in His righteousness at our baptisms, and He keeps us in His righteousness by sustaining our faith. We have not earned this holiness; we do not deserve it. It is ours by the free gift of God, given to us by grace.

II

Naturally, the devil and our old Adam will do everything they can to pull us away from the certainty of God's grace, and to focus us on the uncertainty of our own efforts. Or they may tempt us to take advantage of the gift, so that we have no real desire to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. "If Jesus forgives my sins and judges me by His righteousness," we think, "then I can do whatever I want. After all, salvation does not depend on me!"

But just because your purse is yours and your wallet is yours, can you just leave it anywhere you want in a big city and expect it will remain yours? No, in fact there is an excellent chance you will lose it! If you set your faith aside, so that you can fit in with the world – doing what it does, thinking how it thinks –, there is an excellent chance that you will forget where your faith resides, and why you need it in the first place. If you have ever seen a Christian stop being a Christian, then you should know that the same thing can happen to you.

This is one of the things Jesus warned His disciples about in today's text. He told them, "*Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There He is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.*" The Greek text says "*pseudochristoi* – pseudo-christs," and "*pseudoprophetai* – pseudo-prophets." Pseudo-christs and pseudo-prophets are anyone who say they hold the key to your happiness, your success, your personal fulfillment, and your future. "I will give you everything you desire," they promise. "I will fulfill your needs. All it takes is a bit of dishonesty. All it takes is a little secrecy. All it takes is a money transfer. And then everything will be yours."

That is how the devil destroys faith. He does not go for it all at once. He picks away at it. He convinces you that the sin you are caught up in is actually a good thing. It is justifiable. Other people in your shoes would make the same decision. Nothing to worry about. He also gets you to think that you can deal with sin later; there's plenty of time – what's the rush? But that's a lie too. You might live for 50 more years, or you might not. The Last Day might be a long way off, but are you willing to bet on it? Jesus said, "*Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect*" (Mt. 24:44).

We are living in the end times, and we should not forget it. While Jesus was foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem, He was also looking ahead to the Day of Judgment. Think of it like a camera lens. With the focus on Jerusalem's pending destruction, everything in the background looked blurry. But once the prophecy about Jerusalem was fulfilled, Jesus' predictions about the end times come into sharper focus. That's where we are now, because the destruction of Jerusalem happened long ago. In A. D. 70, the Romans broke through the walls of Jerusalem following a several month siege. To demonstrate that their victory was complete, the Romans tore the beautiful temple to pieces and left no one stone upon another.

But in one of the more fascinating footnotes in history, the Christians escaped the horrible destruction in Jerusalem. How? When they heard the Roman army was on the march, they did

not seek shelter inside Jerusalem's great walls; they fled to a little town called Pella. They believed Jesus' words, and the Lord mercifully spared them.

It may seem to you that the armies of the devil and the world are closing in. There are constant reports of wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, and increasing lawlessness in the world. But the Lord has not forgotten about you. He knows how vulnerable you feel. He sees how you struggle with temptation and sin. "Trust in Me," He says. "I will not let you down. My Word is true." As the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah says, "*the LORD has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted*" (49:13). He comforts you with the message of sins forgiven in Christ and of eternal life won for you. Your cares and struggles are ever before Him. He says, "*Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands*" (v. 16).

By faith in Jesus, you belong to the Jerusalem that will not be destroyed, the heavenly Jerusalem. Its walls cannot be breached because they are defended by the mighty God. Its citizens cannot be overcome by the enemy, because they reside in the presence of their gracious Lord. His holiness covers them. His blood cleanses them. His Word keeps them from harm. **The Lord Has Mercy on His People** — on you! — and His mercy endures forever.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

+ + +