

The Third to Last Sunday of the Church Year
St. Matthew 24:15-28: "Preparation for the Tribulation and Glory to Come"
November 10/11, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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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 warns us about the troubles of the end times, so that we might fix our eyes on Him and put our full confidence in His promises, dear fellow redeemed:

Just before the words of Jesus in today's text, His disciples asked Him, "what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Mt. 24:3). Unfortunately, Jesus did not predict that life in this world would get better and better, but that it would get worse. He told them, "you will hear of wars and rumors of wars," and "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places" (vv. 6,7). The times would be especially trying for Christians, who would be delivered up to tribulation, put to death, and "hated by all nations for [His] name's sake" (v. 9). Besides all this, "false prophets will arise," and "lawlessness will be increased" (vv. 11,12).

We can see these signs of the end times everywhere we look. We see violence carried out through international conflict, civil wars, and through the senseless taking of life such as what we have recently witnessed in Pennsylvania and California. We see natural disasters around the world – floods, tornados, droughts, wildfires, and earthquakes – which claim hundreds of lives each year. We see Christians being persecuted and killed simply because of their beliefs. And we see false teachers working to lead people away from God and to themselves.

We see all these signs, but as long as they stay a safe distance from us, it is easy to ignore them. We might feel badly for victims of violence or disasters when we hear about them, but then we go back to what we were doing before. These signs of the end times should have a greater effect on us.

I

In today's text, Jesus gave a two-part warning. The first warning was about the destruction of Jerusalem, and the second warning was about the end times and Christ's glorious return. The destruction of Jerusalem happened in the year 70. The Israelites had risen up against the Romans, and they began to fortify Jerusalem against a Roman attack. When these things happened, the Christians quickly left the city and relocated to other places. They remembered Jesus' words. But the other residents of the city did not leave, and "*great tribulation*" came upon them as Jesus had predicted.

Tragedies like this have happened throughout history despite God's merciful warnings. The people of Noah's day had 120 years of warning while Noah and his sons built the ark. But they paid no attention. Jesus said, "*they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away*" (Mt. 24:38-39). Later on when the LORD had settled His people in the promised land of Canaan, they continuously pursued other gods. He sent prophets to call them back, but they either ignored the prophets or killed them. This led to the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 B. C. and the fall of the southern kingdom in 586 B. C.

There are many more examples like these, examples of those who did not take God's Word seriously. They did not perceive the danger they were in. They thought everything was fine. We can fall into the same sort of thinking. For the most part, we have not been personally touched by the kind of violence we hear about in the news. We have not had our homes destroyed by natural disasters. We have not suffered physical harm because of our confession of faith.

This can make us complacent. We can get comfortable with life in the world. We can neglect the Word of God and prayer because we expect we can always go back to those things in the future. But Jesus would not have us adopt such a lazy attitude. "*Therefore stay awake,*" He says, "*for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!*" (Mk. 13:35-37).

When heavy rains are predicted in our area, many in our community stay awake through the night to make sure their homes are not flooded. They recognize the threat, and they want to be as prepared as they can be. When Jesus predicts tribulation for believers in these end times, we

want to remain spiritually alert. We don't want to be caught sleeping when persecution comes, or when *"false christs and false prophets"* try to pull us from the true faith.

II

But how do we get ready for these tribulations? How do we prepare? We prepare by listening to the One who accurately warned about these things in the first place. Of all that Jesus said, how much of it has proven to be untrue? Not one word. Everything He predicted and promised up till now has happened as He said it would. We can trust what Jesus says.

We can trust Him when He says He *"came to seek and to save the lost"* (Lk. 19:10). He came to save you and me, who were lost in our sins and in the darkness of unbelief. He saved us by substituting His life for ours, the faithful Shepherd for the wayward sheep. We can trust that His words, *"It is finished"* (Jn. 19:30), apply to His work that was needed to save us and all sinners. The perfect life and the payment for sin that God required of humankind were fully supplied by Jesus. We can trust Him when He says, *"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"* (Jn. 16:33). Through His resurrection, Jesus proved that nothing could overcome Him – not sin, not the devil, not the world, and not even death itself.

These are the things to keep in mind as we face tribulation in the world. No matter how great our enemies are, Jesus is greater. But He does not use His power like the world uses its power. The world uses its power to intimidate, to suppress, to silence, to hurt, and to kill. Jesus uses His power to save. In his second epistle the apostle Peter states, *"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"* (2Pe. 3:9).

Jesus wants everyone to be saved. He does not want any to be caught sleeping. He does not want any to be condemned. This is why He has His Gospel message proclaimed throughout the world. The same message of salvation that we hear today is also being heard in Peru and Pakistan and China and in countless other places. Our fellow Christians humbly listen to the Law which condemns their sin, and they gladly hear the Gospel which forgives their sin.

III

This powerful Word of God is what prepares us and them for tribulation here, but also for glory in heaven. The apostle Paul writes that *"the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"* (Rom. 8:18). And Paul suffered plenty, just as the other disciples did. Their tribulation was so great that they expected Jesus to return in glory during their lifetimes. But His time was not yet. There were more souls to save.

And so it is now. The signs of the end times are all here. Jesus could visibly return at any point. Now is not the time to get sleepy. Now is the time to hear and learn His Word. This is what keeps us alert and prepared. It keeps us from getting too comfortable in the world, and it shows us the difference between the true Christ and false christs, between true prophets and false prophets.

Through His Word, the true Christ visits us, though not visibly. He comes to us through the preaching of His Gospel. He says, *"where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them"* (Mt. 18:20). And He comes through His Holy Supper, where He gives His own body and

blood for the forgiveness of sins. These are the ways Jesus is present with us *“always, to the end of the age”* (Mt. 28:20). He does not grow tired of us or reject us, even though we have gotten spiritually sleepy at times and have followed gods of our own making. He leads us to repentance and applies His soul-saving absolution—the full and unconditional forgiveness of all our sins.

Jesus may seem very far away from us, especially when we are experiencing trouble. But in fact, He is very near. He is *“a very present help in trouble”* (Ps. 46:1). He has not forgotten about us. He covers us in the armor of His righteousness and fills us with the courage that comes from being claimed as His own. The Lord would not forget His chosen ones. He promises that our short time of tribulation in this life will soon give way to eternal glory.

Brief life is here our portion;
Brief sorrow, short-lived care;
The life that knows no ending,
The tearless life, is there.
O happy retribution:
Short toil, eternal rest;
For mortals and for sinners
A mansion with the blest! (ELH #534, v. 3)

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.

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