

The Sunday after The Ascension
1 Peter 4:7-11: "Marching Orders for the End Times"
May 23/24, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, who made us stewards of Your manifold gifts and alone give ability for every duty, we humbly ask You, forgive us all that we have done amiss, and govern us by Your Holy Spirit, that our love may be fervent, that we may faithfully minister our gifts one to another, continually increase in temperance and godliness, to the end that in all things You may be glorified, and that we may obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 128)

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 fourth chapter of St. Peter's First Epistle. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ^(ESV)

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

In Christ Jesus, who when He ascended on high led a host of captives and gave gifts to men (Eph. 4:8), dear fellow redeemed:

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember some of the major battles in America history and the heroic people who fought in them. To prepare them for the violent conflict to come, the commanding officer would remind them why they were there. He might invoke the principles of freedom, justice, and the cause of good to inspire them. He would urge them to take courage and not be afraid of the enemy. If each man did his part, victory would certainly be theirs.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He mustered His "troops" and gave them their "marching orders," so to speak. His objective, however, was not physical conquest. The battle they were to engage in was a spiritual one. Their success and victory would not come by way of the sword, but by way of the Word. They were to make disciples for Jesus by baptizing and teaching all nations (Mat. 28:19-20). To equip them for this Jesus said, "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now," and "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Act. 1:5,8).

Then Jesus was taken up from them into heaven. What was their next move now that their mighty Lord was no longer visibly present to lead them? They returned to Jerusalem and devoted themselves to prayer (Luk. 24:53, Act. 1:14). At this time, they certainly didn't look like a force to be reckoned with. Their number was small, and no one expected much from them with Jesus out of the picture.

But then the Holy Spirit came upon them, which we will hear more about next weekend. On that Pentecost day, 3000 repented of their sin and were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The number of Christian disciples increased day after day, which alarmed the Jewish religious leaders and the governmental authorities. The Jewish leaders wanted the apostles to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. When threats did not work, they turned to violence (Act. 5:40). With their blessing, Saul led a persecution against the Christians beginning with the stoning of Stephen.

From the secular side, King Herod was also concerned with the growth of the Christian church. He wanted no unrest in his kingdom and wanted all honor and glory for himself. He did not want some Christian uprising to threaten his earthly authority. Herod got wrong what so many godless rulers have since. They see Christianity as a physical threat that must be suppressed by physical force. So Herod *"laid violent hands"* on some Christians and *"killed James the brother of John with the sword"* (Act. 12:1-2). He was glad to see that this pleased the Jews. But he was afraid of a violent reprisal from Christians. When he arrested the apostle Peter, he put him in prison and ordered four squads of soldiers to guard him.

And what were the Christians doing when this happened? Were they drawing up plans to sneak into the prison and overcome the guards? Were they sharpening their swords and knives for an attack? St. Luke writes that while Peter was in prison, *"earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church"* (Act. 12:5). That was the Christians' response to this violence and trouble: they prayed. God answered their prayers for deliverance and sent an angel to release Peter from his chains and from prison.

Some years after this, Peter would record his First and Second Epistles. In today's text from his First Epistle, he outlines what we might call **"Marching Orders for the End Times."** The end times began when Jesus ascended into heaven. On that day, two angels told the disciples not to *"stand looking into heaven,"* and that Jesus *"will come in the same way as you saw him go"* (Act. 1:11). They told them He would return, but not right away.

Nearly 2000 years have passed since then, and Peter's words are just as present and pressing now as ever: *"The end of all things is at hand."* We are to live in expectation of Jesus' return. We should constantly prepare for the last day. The clock is ticking. Our time and the world's time are running out. But how exactly should we stay prepared?

We must *"be self-controlled and sober-minded."* This means not letting the devil, the world, and our own flesh cloud our thinking. This happens when our plans are more important to us than God's plan, when earthly riches mean more to us than heavenly riches, when personal pleasure and self-satisfaction keep our focus more than hearing God's Word and doing His will.

We do not work to clear our minds of this clutter simply to feel more at peace or to “center ourselves” like the Eastern religions teach. We want clear and sober minds “for the sake of [our] prayers.” A mind distracted by worldly pursuits is not focused on the Lord and His promises. But when the Holy Spirit clears our minds by the power of the Word, we are ready to pray for our needs, for our fellow believers, and for all others. Time spent in humble prayer to the merciful God is never time wasted.

Besides prayer, God also calls us to “love one another earnestly” and to “show hospitality to one another.” Unbelievers generally expect believers to think and behave like they do, and in our sin we often do. But our light shines in the dark world when we do the unexpected. The world expects people to look out for themselves, to hold grudges, and to seek revenge. But God’s children love their neighbors as themselves, they forgive wrongs done against them, they respond with kindness when someone lashes out at them in anger or spite.

Peter writes that “love covers a multitude of sins.” If there were no love in us, think how many sins we could hold against others, big sins and little sins. The list would keep getting longer and longer. But then think how many sins God could bring up against us. We can’t imagine how long that list would be. No one has committed more sins against us than we have committed against God. And it’s not even close. But His love, in Christ, “covers a multitude of sins” –in fact, His love covers all of them.

This is what makes us willing and eager to take “marching orders” from the Lord. We know what He has done for us. We know the battle He had to fight to save us. We know what it cost. The God-Man Jesus had to suffer the eternal fires of hell in our place. He had to accept the full payment of God’s wrath for sin. He had to die.

If He was willing to do that to redeem you, to redeem me, that means we are not expendable in His eyes. He’s not going to send us to the front lines in a futile attempt to slow the enemy’s advance. He leads the way into battle. He fights for us and with us. He destroys the devil’s plans through His powerful Word, which motivates and guides our prayers and our lives of love. Wherever our love falls short, as it often has, His does not. His love covers over and hides our sins. Because our sins were put on Jesus, our heavenly Father does not find them on us anymore.

Forgiven of our sins, we are now able to approach the Father’s throne in confident prayer and to share His love with those around us. By His grace He bestows gifts upon us to use in service to others. But what gifts do we have? They are different for every person. No two people are alike in every way, having the same interests and abilities.

The Lord has equipped each of us in our vocations, our callings, to serve the people in our lives. What drives some people to serve is the recognition and thanks they receive. And if they are not recognized, they regret their service. But the good things we are able to do are not our own. We did not make these good things possible. We are not in control of their success.

God gives us our particular gifts like a master gives his goods to a servant. The servant does not take credit for the goods. He did not earn them or build them up. They belong to his master. He is simply a steward of the goods. He is given the job of management. So however the Lord has

equipped you and whatever good you do, the glory belongs to Him and not to you. You are a steward of the gifts God graciously gives. You do not need to seek recognition for the things you do. You already have God's approval in Christ, who lived a life of perfect love and service in your place. That perfect life is credited to you by faith in Him.

So these are the Christian's **Marching Orders for the End Times**: pray, love, and serve in the name of Jesus. This kind of life will put you at odds with the world, which means you should expect to suffer. But you will not suffer alone. Your great and mighty King is with you in the conflict. He strengthens you when you are feeling faint and weak and are not sure you can carry on. He graciously forgives you and reinstates you by His Word of absolution when you fall into sin and desert your post. And He promises to relieve you from this struggle at the appointed time. He will come again in the same way the disciples saw Him go to take you to be with Him forever.

Not much has changed since the time that Peter wrote his epistle. The enemies are the same, and the sufferings and sorrows of this battle are the same. But our Lord's commitment to us is the same too. His power to overcome whatever rises against us and His love and care for us as we struggle is unchanged. His promise to be with us and strengthen us is unchanged. His triumph over the forces of evil arrayed against us is unchanged.

We are safe and secure in Him. We are on the winning side. He has given us the victory by faith in Him, and we will soon have our rest in His heavenly kingdom. *"To Him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."*

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