

"Getting Closer"

Luke 21:5-28

November 13, 2016

26th Sunday After Pentecost

Something important happened in our nation last Tuesday. Judging by the reactions of people on Wednesday, it's hard to tell whether it was a bad thing or a good thing. People were marching in the streets of major cities in protest. College students were weeping and asking for (and receiving) excused absences from classes because they were just too distraught to attend. Meanwhile, other people were clapping, cheering, and celebrating. They went about the normal activities of their day apparently with a spring in their step and a song in their heart. It's funny how people experiencing the same event can have such different reactions – bad and good – to that event.

Something similar may occur as we begin to see signs of a more catastrophic event than even our national election: namely, the end of the world and the return of Jesus Christ in judgment. The Scripture readings for the final Sundays of the church year paint a chilling picture of what is to come.

Our Gospel reading for today begins with the signs of the destruction of the Temple – God pouring out His wrath against His own people for their faithlessness. The Jewish people were very proud of the beauty of the Temple and very confident of the durability of the Temple. It was proof of God's presence among them. But Jesus tells them, "This Temple will be destroyed to the point that not one stone will be left standing on another."

Naturally, the people want to know WHEN this will happen. What are the signs they should look for? Jesus says that there will be false teachers coming to deceive them and lead them astray. There will be wars and tumults. There will be conflict between nations and among kingdoms. There will be natural disasters: earthquakes, famines, and pestilences. There will be terrors and great signs from heaven. There will be persecution of Jesus' followers. They will be betrayed, not just by enemies, but by parents and brothers and relatives and friends. Followers of Jesus Christ will be hated for His name's sake. Some will be put to death for the faith.

Jesus goes on to say that it is not just the Temple that will be destroyed but the entire city of Jerusalem as well. Normally, a walled city like Jerusalem would be a safe place to be but this display of God's anger is going to be so intense that Jesus warns the people NOT to enter the city but flee to the mountains. There will be great distress and wrath against the people. Many will die by the sword. Others will be led into captivity. The great and glorious Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles.

All of this was fulfilled in 70 AD when Titus and the troops of Rome overran Jerusalem and burned the Temple. God's wrath against sin and the rejection of His Son was fully poured out. It was a horrific sight.

But what does this have to do with us? We are not Jews. We do not live in Jerusalem. We do not worship at the Temple. But we are still part of the world's sinful humanity. God is still angry at sin. And there will be a day of reckoning – a day of judgment like there was for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Only the day of judgment for Jerusalem will be nothing compared with the coming Judgment Day. You know how we speak of the Lord's Supper as a "foretaste of the feast to come"? We mean that the Lord's Supper is good but heaven will be much better. Well, we could say that the judgment against Jerusalem is but a foretaste of the judgment to come. The judgment against Jerusalem was bad but the final judgment against the world will be much worse.

This is when Jesus says it will get even more scary. He says, "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the

roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

The events leading up to judgment will be much worse. We are already experiencing some of them already. We see many false preachers and false teachers promoting false religions and false worldviews. We read of wars and tumults – nations rising against nations and kingdoms – in the Middle East and other locations. People all over the world are experiencing earthquakes, famines, and other natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, and fires. Like the disciples in Jesus times who were persecuted by both secular and religious authorities, faithful Christians are starting to be hassled by government and rejected by mainstream religious organizations.

We wait for the signs of the end to show themselves – the REALLY terrifying ones: signs in the sun and moon and stars; perplexity among the nations; people fainting in fear and foreboding; the powers of the heavens themselves being shaken. And then....the Judge returns. The Son of Man comes in a cloud with power and great glory. What do we do then?

As we see the signs of the end which are already here and as we begin to see more signs appearing, we can do what many people will do: be terrified and depressed. The world is already in bad shape. Imagine it all getting worse. We can be led astray by religious, political, and cultural leaders who promise quick fixes to our problems if we just change our religious faith, our legal system, and our cultural norms. We can live lives of uncertainty and fear without any joy for now or hope for the future. The condition of our world and the foreboding signs of what is to come seem to leave us no other choice.

But remember what our national election taught us last Tuesday. People can experience the exact same event but come away with diametrically opposed views. Some people thought that the election of Donald Trump as president was the most terrible and horrifying thing ever while others thought it was a good and welcomed thing. In the same way, there is another way to react to the signs of the end and the end of the world itself than the typical fear and dread. There is a good way of looking at it.

Jesus says, “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” The coming end of all things and the signs of that coming is no reason to be bent over in fear with head bowed in dread. This is a time to rejoice and be glad. “The end of the world is not a reason for fear, but a reason to stand tall and look up into the heavens, because life in the presence of the Eternal One is about to begin.” (Just, Volume 2, p.803) We are not getting farther and farther away from peace and tranquility because of all the turmoil in the world. We are getting closer and closer to eternal life because of the return of Jesus.

Jesus, our righteous Judge, has already paid the price to redeem us – to buy us back from sin, death, judgment, and hell with His own blood shed on the cross – and make us His own. In our Baptism, we were washed clean from the filth of our sin, declared to be not guilty by our Lord, and accepted by Him as His sons and daughters. In the Absolution, we are told every week that we have been forgiven and, therefore, judged to be not guilty in the sight of God. In the Lord’s Supper, we are united to our Lord and life with Him through the eating and drinking of His body and blood with the bread and the wine, assuring us that this is but a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which will surely take place when He returns in glory.

While Jesus IS coming to judge the world, He is coming to claim us, His people, whom He bought with His blood and owns for all eternity. While pagans and unbelievers should dread the fearful signs of the times and fear Jesus’ coming, we joyfully look at the same signs and happily look forward to Jesus’ coming. Therefore, continue to trust in Jesus as we wait. Do not be led astray or overcome by fear. See the coming time, not as persecution, but as opportunity to witness to the hope and joy that fills you. Be calm and confident. Watch the signs. Victory is getting closer. Salvation is getting closer. Heaven and eternal life are getting closer. Jesus is getting closer. Amen.