

Populus Zion
9 December, Anno Domini 2018
St. Luke 21:25-36
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Dear children of God, it is good for us to be able to stop and give attention again to the last things here in the middle of our preparations for Christmas. The truth is, we aren't really preparing for Christmas. The incarnation of our Lord has already occurred. You don't prepare for what is passed. But we are preparing. Or we should be. We should be preparing for Jesus because Jesus IS coming. But not in the manger, not in humility. "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." That's all that remains. There is only one piece of your redemption left - its completion, the day when your Savior comes with all his angels and gathers together all who believe and are baptized on His right hand and all those who rejected Him and the way of redemption on His left for eternal judgment; the day when our faith in Christ is vindicated in the sight of all people; the day when sin and death are finally and eternally put away from you, never to trouble you again. And that is good news. It's fantastic news! It should cause your heart to leap and your head to raise up because on that day every promise of God that He has made to His children will be fulfilled and your deliverance will be complete.

Now, it has certainly been a long time since Jesus walked the earth and made this promise. And at first glance it would seem as though nothing has really significantly changed. People still hate each other. Nations still go to war with each other. The sun still rises and sets. Men are still finding new outlets for their wicked desires. There are drunks and addicts. People seem to ONLY be concerned about the cares of this life. Our heads are perpetually bent down to the earth, looking to and fro for pleasure and happiness and fulfillment, weeping and lamenting the suffering we see on every side. Every hour of every day is scheduled out so as to maximize our ability to chase after our idols of success, wealth, entertainment, finding ourselves, enjoyment, and even the assurance of our salvation - true faith is busy but business is not faith.

As Luther observed in his own day "For the history of the centuries that have passed since the birth of Christ nowhere reveals conditions like those of the present. There has never been such building and planting in the world. There has never been such gluttonous and varied eating and drinking as now. Wearing apparel has reached its limit in costliness. Who has ever heard of such commerce as now encircles the earth." Oh, Luther. If only you could see us now! Every hour that our Lord delays His coming is another hour in which the world finds new ways to plunge itself deeper into darkness and blindness. The more we claim to understand and know the more arrogant and foolish we become and the more we blind ourselves to the warnings and reminders that the end is drawing near.

And the signs of the end are there if you believe the Word of Jesus. What does He say? What signs does he give here? "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars." Look into the heavens. There the Lord has graciously placed reminders, signs, tokens of His imminent return because He doesn't want you to forget, to be lulled into complacency and be lost. Now, of course

we understand the mechanics of eclipses and while we stand in awe of them and rush out hoping to get a glimpse of this incredible phenomenon do we understand it for what it is? What about lunar eclipses and the other signs in the heavens, even rainbows? Do we simply dismiss them as natural occurrences that have no real significance or importance? Are we to be counted among those who no longer pay attention? Will we be caught unaware and thus unprepared? Have we given up the watch and spent our energy and efforts and resources trying to carve out a cozy life in this world? Would we be just as content if Jesus never returned, maybe even hoped that he wouldn't, because our desire is for all that is fleeting and passing away?

Repent. We haven't yet reached the end of the world, but the signs God gives are reminders that the day is coming. St. Matthew records these words of Jesus regarding these signs "...the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." (Matt. 24:29) These particular cataclysmic, apocalyptic events haven't happened but when they do it will be too late. Yes, there are precursory events that have been taking place since the world began, teasers to call us to attention. Understanding them doesn't negate that God has appointed these events for our learning. Consider the rest of creation. It's coming apart at the seams...literally. Hurricanes, raging fires, earthquakes, wars, riots. The whole creation is slowing being torn apart. That is what sin does. It destroys. It tears apart. It unsettles mountains and seas. It torments consciences. It spreads cancerous cells. It causes unexplained seizures and sudden death. It turns husbands against their wives and parents against their children.

All of these signs should leave us unsettled. We shouldn't be comfortable in this world. If the light of faith is burning we should see exactly what is happening. Things won't, can't, get better. The devil and his world are filled with an insane hatred of God and the truth He speaks. They will stop at nothing to remove God from His throne and to keep His Word, the one and only thing that will not pass away, from you. That and that alone is the motivation for absolutely everything the world does. It is the same motivation that drives your sinful flesh and your sinful desires. It is what blinds us to the signs so that we forget and stop looking for Christ. If we aren't expecting Him at any moment then we won't be prepared. We will happily set aside the Means of Grace for other pursuits because, you know, there's always next time. We will let the hours of the day be consumed with trivial, useless, even deadly pursuits while ignoring the breaking of bread and the prayers, refusing to open the Scriptures and feed ourselves and our families with the life-giving Word of Jesus.

That is dead faith. That is faith that has been starved and suffocated. And if you have given up the watch, if you refuse to heed the signs and warnings that are all around, if you cast aside the very means by which Christ keeps you prepared, that day will snap upon you like a trap and will be nothing but sheer terror for you because you will have traded the things of eternal life for the things that are passing away, things that will be consumed and turned to stubble in the purifying fire of God's righteous judgment. Wake up! The night is flying and the dawn is approaching. Listen to cry of the watchmen. Lay aside the sin that so easily entangles. Don't indulge the flesh thinking a little won't hurt. Lay aside your worldly cares and focus your attention on heavenly things - righteousness, peace, forgiveness, holiness, and mercy.

Heed the Word of Christ who has forewarned you and so armed you that the day of His return will find your head high and lifted up in eager expectation. True faith, faith which will deliver on that day, is ever watchful, always in prayer, always striving and wrestling against the flesh and its desires. True faith is perpetually unsettled in this world because this world is filled with and ruled by evil. You, beloved children of God, baptized into the redeeming death of Jesus, do not need to fear the Last Day. Instead, cry out to God and urge Him to come as soon as possible. Urge Him to end the madness and the destroying works of Satan. Pray that He would come and deliver His children who daily face death for confessing His Name. Pray that He would come and put an end to the scourge of violence against the pre-born and any who are weak and stand in need of our care, the hatred that fills most conversations these days, the madness of those who seek to destroy godly marriages and families and even what it means to be male and female.

Ignore those who try to fill you with fear by trying to predict the very day or who mock you for even believing that there will be such a day. They know nothing. Jesus is coming. And you know exactly everything you need to know, because Christ Himself, the very one who is coming back, has told you what you need. Christ wants you to be prepared and so He has given you the signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. You see how the nations are filled with upheaval and distress. You see how the world is falling apart. Rejoice! All of these mean only one thing - our salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. Your Lord is coming back for you. He will come and take you out of this valley of sorrow. He will wipe away every tear. He will cast the devil deep into the darkness of hell where he will never be able to tempt or torment you again. He will restore your flesh so that pain and disease will never be able to afflict you again and so there will never again be the dark hours of wrestling against the temptation that flows from within.

And even though everything in this creation will pass away, there is one thing and one thing only that will never pass away - the very Word which is the foundation of your faith, the bedrock upon which you rest as the storms rage and the wicked world assails you. This Word which declares you righteous. The Word which filled the font and there has put your sins away from you forever. The Word of God which has broken the chains of death and the gates of hell. The holy Word of absolution which is sealed to you by the Blood of the Lamb, will never change, will never be taken away from you. The gates of hell will not and cannot prevail against it. Your Lord will never change His mind. Your sins ARE forgiven. And the Lord Jesus comes to you this day to give to you from this altar the very Body and Blood shed to win that forgiveness. Christ's Body and Blood are the pledge and seal of the Holy Word of Absolution. It is this food, this humble meal, filled with the eternal, unchanging Word and promises of God Almighty, that will strengthen and preserve you in that day when everything around you is falling apart and we are all standing before His judgment seat, longing to hear our Lord summon us to eternal life.

Dear children of God, do not let the signs God has given you go unnoticed. Do not be lulled to sleep and be caught on that great day. "Stay awake, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly and save us.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.

