

Populus Zion
5 & 6 December, Anno Domini 2020
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, this year has been a fresh reminder of why the incarnation of Jesus is so important. The Son of God has taken on human flesh for the express purpose of providing real hope and peace in this world that is so broken and filled with death. And that hope is not that things will get better or that the sinful world will suddenly stop being the sinful world. The hope is that when the appointed time has come, and it is coming, the Lord Jesus Christ, who once laid wrapped in swaddling cloths in the manger, will come again in power and glory to put away sin and death forever. He will draw us into His unveiled presence where there are no diseases, no power-hungry politicians, no lockdowns, and no death.

This is what we are preparing for, not really Christmas. Christmas is the time set aside to marvel at the mystery of our Lord's incarnation - God wrapping Himself in human flesh. But that has already occurred. You don't prepare for what is passed but for what lies ahead. Or we should be. We should be preparing for Jesus because Jesus IS coming. But it will not be in the manger, not in humility. Our Lord Jesus said "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." That is all that remains. The Son of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He rose triumphantly from the grave. He ascended, still in the flesh, to the right hand of the Father. That leaves only one piece of our redemption left - its completion, the day when our incarnate Savior comes again with all his angels and gathers together on His right hand all who believe and are baptized and casts into eternal punishment those who refused His salvation, who sought but earthly pleasures, whose hearts were given to idols. On that day our hope in Christ will be vindicated in the sight of all people. On that day sin and death will finally and eternally put away from you, never to trouble you again. And that is good news. There couldn't be better 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 been around 2,000 years since Jesus walked the earth and made this promise. And at first glance it would seem as though nothing has changed significantly. 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 same old 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. We can't seem to find anything more edifying to do with our time than watching endless TikTok videos of so-called influencers designed to make you covet the great life they're supposedly living and you aren't.

Luther lamented of 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." Luther, you have no idea. 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 and self-destruction. The more we claim to know and understand because of science and technology, 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 His Church to pay attention to? "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 listen to its voice as it calls us to be ready? What about super novas 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 the truth is that we like this world and can't imagine losing it?

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 the physics 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, derechos, raging fires, plagues, earthquakes, wars, riots. The whole creation is slowly being torn apart. These are not natural phenomenon at all. They only happen because Adam dragged all of creation under the curse of sin when He despised God's Word. 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. It breaks forth in riots and destruction.

All of these signs should leave us unsettled and remind us of what our Lord said. 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. Jesus didn't tell you to fix what is happening. He told you to hold fast to His Word. That alone is your defense. The devil and his world are filled with an insane hatred of God and the truth He speaks. That won't change until they are cast into hell forever. Until then, they will stop at nothing to keep God's 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. You know it well. 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 sinful 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.

Those are the works of unbelief. 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, the things by which God saves and causes you to persevere in faith to the end - the Word of God, the promises of your Baptism, the absolution, the Holy Communion, and prayer. Humble yourself. Practice piety. Strive after virtue. Train in holy living. Read the Scriptures and pray daily. Fast. Give alms. Say "no" to the world and what it offers. It's poison wrapped in candy.

Heed the Word of Christ who has forewarned you and armed you so that the day of His return will find your head high and lifted up in vigilant and 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 deemed weak and those who 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 and provides it. 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 now than when we first believed. Dear Christian, 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 and sorrow 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. Even though the entire creation is ripped apart and collapses, your salvation will stand unmoved, unchanged, unshaken. Your Lord will never change His mind. Your sins ARE forgiven. And until the day when He comes in power for judgment, because He know your weakness and the terrible struggle to keep the faith in the face of so much resistance, He comes to strengthen and preserve you through the preaching of His eternal life-giving Word and the food of His Body and Blood. By these He pledges to you again your salvation on the Last Day. Every Divine Service, every proclamation of absolution is a dress rehearsal for that day. Indeed, this is your Judgment Day and this day in Christ, you are judged innocent - free of all guilt and an heir of God's kingdom.

Dear children of God, do not let the signs God has given you go unnoticed. Do not be lulled to sleep and be caught unprepared on that great day. Instead, "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.