

Populus Zion
5 December, Anno Domini 2021
St. Luke 21:25-36
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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The end times are always a popular topic. Some of the scenes depicted in Daniel and Revelation, Malachi and even what we heard again today from Jesus Himself can make for good books and movies filled with suspense and drama. But if we aren't careful, the Last Day will seem to us like nothing more than that - a fantastic tale that isn't actually going to happen.

The Last Day is certainly coming. Both the Old and the New Testaments clearly teach us that, time and time again. There are lots of descriptions of that day but none of them are meant for entertainment. Jesus doesn't issue warnings without reason and if He tells us that something is going to happen, something that will cause such fear and trembling, we would do well to listen so that we aren't caught sleeping and so join the unbelieving masses in their dread and eternal destruction.

How many of us are on the edge of our seats waiting for Jesus to return? How many of us live in the constant expectation that this could be the last day, that this could be the day that Jesus returns with power and great glory in order to separate the sheep from the goats? Instead, how many of us have simply fallen asleep, assuming that there will be a tomorrow and that most likely Jesus isn't going to return in our life time so why worry about it? I can confidently tell you that every last person in this room has given up the watch at some point. How can I say that? Have you sinned? Have you indulged the sick desires and twisted fantasies of your mind? When was the last time that you cried out to God, begging Him to strengthen you and to defend His Church so that you might escape those terribly frightening things that He has warned are coming?

Or consider the question from another angle. Are you afraid of the Last Day? When you hear about Judgment Day are you worried? Are you filled with doubt and uncertainty? If Christ were to return right now, which He very well could, would you be ready? Or do you even think about it? Do you think only crazy street preachers and the Kirk Cameron-rapturists actually believe in that end times stuff?

Repent. Listen to the crazy street preachers. Heed their warning, the warning Jesus Himself gives of those things that are about to happen. Whether today, tomorrow, or in 2000 years - that we don't know. But we do know they will happen, that many of those things are happening. The signs are all around you. Are you paying attention to them? Are you waiting with baited breath for Christ's return? The tree is budding and summer is nearer now than it has ever been. Wake up! The waves are roaring and crashing. The creation is coming unhinged, ripping apart. Earthquakes, wars, hurricanes, nation destroying nation, plagues, famines, riots. Murdered bodies of the preborn piling up like mountains in the name of choice. The sanctity of marriage and even basic biological truths being attacked and torn down as foolish. What kind of world do we live in when we men, rather than being the defenders, are willing to send our precious wives and daughters to the front lines of battle to die in our place defending us?

And before you get too caught up in your outrage over those evil people, look for a moment in the mirror. How easy is it for you to despise the Divine Service of your heavenly Father who causes His eternal and life-giving Word to be preached and lays before you the very Body and Blood of the Son He sacrificed on the cross for your salvation, so that you do not have to fear the Last Day? How much time do you and your family spend preparing, gathering together around the Word of God in your home, talking about the things of salvation, praying for one another, for your brothers and sisters in the faith, for the whole Church of God, for your unbelieving relatives and friends and neighbors that they might yet be graciously snatched from eternal death? How often have you allowed yourself to become drunk on the cares and pleasures of this world, dulled to the dangers that lie all around, to the lion who even this hour is prowling around waiting for the perfect moment to sink his teeth and claws into your soul and drag you back to the lair of hell from which you have been rescued? How often have you despised the cleansing gift of Holy Baptism and gone and wallowed in the filth of your anger and lust and jealousy and laziness and greed and self-righteousness?

Repent while it is still called "Today." Because that day is coming, burning like an oven with the purifying fire of divine judgment when all hearts will be revealed and all be seen as they have been and the patience of God will have reached its end. On that day it won't matter if your house was just

like you want it or if you missed the big game or if your children got straight A's and went to college. It won't matter if you missed the best time of day to go hunting or if you didn't work enough to get out of debt or if you didn't win that argument. None of that matters and if you refuse to believe that now, that truth will be made abundantly clear when you see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Do not take Jesus' warning lightly. Know for certain that the devil believes that Jesus is returning and the Old Evil Foe is using every weapon available to him in these last hours to make sure you are caught unaware. He is seeking at every turn to lull you to sleep so that the Last Day falls upon you like a trap and you are unprepared, separated from Christ, having despised the very means by which Christ Himself prepares, strengthens and keeps you.

Christ doesn't want you to be among those fainting with fear and with foreboding at even the prospect of His coming, let alone when He actually does return. He doesn't want you to be caught trembling and terrified. That's why in love He warns you and tells you what is going to happen. The one who is prepared doesn't need to worry about exactly what day it is. The one who is prepared is always preparing, always assuming and even praying that today IS that day. The one who is prepared is the one who lives as an exile in this world, as one who isn't where they belong. This isn't your home. This world of sensuality and greed and death is not where the children of God belong. They belong with Him. The one who lives from his Baptism is prepared. The one who rests alone in what Christ has done for him and finds His peace and comfort and assurance in the words "This is my Body and Blood, given and shed for you."

Truthfully, you can't prepare yourself. Christ alone can do that. You can't forgive your sins. You can't make yourself holy. Only Christ can do that. And He does. That is exactly what He does by His Word - He daily prepares you for His return. The Divine Service is, in some ways, a rehearsal for the Day of Judgment, when all will stand before Christ's glorious throne. And how you stand before Him here will determine how you will stand before Him that day. Do you acknowledge your sin? Do you acknowledge that there is nothing good in your flesh? Do you acknowledge that apart from Christ, you are deserving only of eternal death and judgment? Do you believe that Christ shed His Blood on the cross for you? Do you believe that by His Word of absolution, your sins have been taken away? Do you believe that as the Baptized you have died with Christ and been raised with Him to new life? Then as you stand here this day,

head lifted to receive your Savior who comes under bread and wine, eager to receive the salvation which He has come again to bestow upon you, so will you stand on that day, head lifted, even as the creation is tearing apart and the unbelievers cower in fear, eager to receive your Savior who will come on clouds of heaven.

But if here you are disinterested, cold, and arrogant toward the things of Christ; if you trust that you have been good enough; if you aren't troubled at all by the wickedness within your own heart; if you are in love with this world and pleasures and treasures; then be afraid. When Christ appears you will your proud head will be brought low and you will join those crying out for the mountains to fall on them because that would certainly be better than to have to face the Judge of the living and the dead. Your sins and your pride will condemn you to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. You will cower in fear and long to repent. But the day for repentance will have passed. You will denied forever that which you denied and had no concern for here on earth.

Living doesn't consist of experiencing everything there is to experience in this world or having everything there is to have. We are to be constantly uncomfortable here, disturbed by what is going on around us. We don't fit in here. We are outcasts and weirdos. We aren't cool. The world will never accept us because we despise the very things the world loves and praises. Or do we? If you're comfortable with the world, you're doing it wrong. We are waiting and longing to be where we belong.

That is why we love and need the Divine Service. It is the foretaste of the feast that is to come. It is where we belong. Here the sun of righteousness rises with healing in His wings. Here we fit in with the rest of the sinners who are seeking mercy and forgiveness from the God they have despised and rebelled against. Here we are not foreigners and strangers. Instead, we gather with our true family around the table of our Heavenly Father. Here we are made one - age, income, intellect, education, race, gender become irrelevant for the same Jesus equally shed His blood for us all. Here we find peace and the rest our souls long for. There is something wrong when this isn't the place that we want to be, when we are willing to set all of this aside for another hour of sleep, or some time on the lake, or family time, or whatever else. Here is the very court of the Lord of hosts. Let your heart long, yes, even faint to be here in Christ's nearest presence.

The fear that you have because of those days and that day in particular is the very thing that should drive you here. Fear of that day is rooted in unbelief. Why fear the return of the One who has redeemed you unless you have refused that redemption, unless you have despised the gifts He gives, unless the favor of men is of greater value to you than the favor and gifts of God, unless you have given up the watch and instead allowed yourself to be weighed down and distracted by the pleasures and cares of this world?

There is only one way to be prepared for the return of our Lord, one way that we may actually look forward to that day and greet it with joy, like calves leaping out of the stalls. Jesus, who has come once already, not in a cloud, but in a manger; not with power and great glory, but in humility and great weakness. He has taken from you every reason to fear His return because He has already suffered the just condemnation of all your sins. He has already bought you back from death at the cost of His precious Blood. All the terrifying signs Jesus speaks of pale in comparison to the great joy of God's children who on that day will straighten themselves up with relief because their warfare will finally be over. You are the dearly loved children of God, not by some work or choosing of your own, but rather by the will of God who washed you and claimed you, who offered up the Lamb of Atonement for you, who invites you to partake of the fruits Jesus' sacrifice in the Holy Supper, the fruits of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

But apart from the things which God gives, there is no being prepared, there is no readiness, and that day will find you filled with dread. Faith is by no stretch of the imagination a once and done matter. Faith needs nourishment, fresh strength, and encouragement. Faith needs the love and forgiveness of Christ poured out to it continually. There are simply too many dangers, too many enemies seeking to destroy faith, including our own flesh for us to imagine that we can stand on our own without the things that Christ gives. Why would we want to even try? Jesus doesn't give and command prayer, Baptism, the word of absolution, and the Holy Supper for no reason. They aren't child's play anymore than our sin is child's play. Sin hurts you. It can and will destroy faith if it is not drowned by the forgiving Blood of Jesus. Only the divinely appointed means can rescue you from the death of sin and strengthen you against your enemies. Only the assurance of Christ's atoning sacrifice can bring you confidence on the Last Day. Will we so lightly and easily miss the opportunity to receive what

cost nothing less than the death of God's Son for us to have? Can such things be unimportant or unnecessary? Sin must be a terrible thing indeed if our redemption from it was only obtained at such an unimaginably high price. Beware. Passing over the gifts of God is passing over God Himself. What could possibly be of such importance, what could possibly bring such good to us that it is worth not being with Jesus when He comes with the gifts of life and salvation? Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. Your excuses will not be heard then, so stop making them now. Prayer that isn't rooted in and doesn't drive you back to the Jesus who meets you in Word and Meal is a prayer to a false god.

Stay awake and pray! Hear, read, and meditate on the Word of God every day. Drink deeply from the cup of salvation poured out to you. Don't give Satan even an inch. Pray fervently that God would guard you in the hour of temptation and do all in your power to keep yourself from it. Pray against sin. Pray against the evil world. Pray against your own weak and sinful flesh. Don't let the things of this world keep you from being in your Father's house receiving your salvation. If you don't feel your need, then at least believe God who tells you that you NEED them. By them and them alone will you be prepared. The Blood of Jesus, the promise of forgiveness in Him, will be your rock and refuge of safety as everything else falls further into chaos and Jesus' return draws closer each and every day. Seek after the joy of salvation, the peace of a clean conscience before God because that is only thing that will matter on that final day and that is exactly what Christ gives to you.

The battle is fierce and the warfare is long, but the night is drawing to a close. The dawn is drawing near, the dawn of an eternal day and then your warfare will be ended forever. In that day there will be no more sin or temptation. In that day all sorrow and sickness will be done away with. There will be no more killing, no more cheating, no more stealing. There will be only the eternal gladness of God's beloved children looking upon their heavenly Father, face to face. Then you will know true rest and joy. Not here. Not now. That is what awaits you. Here, there remains spiritual warfare. Here there remains the cross and suffering. But here also there remains the sure and certain promise of salvation. Do not carelessly cast it aside for trash. Do not let it be taken from you because you slept. Do not let the fire of faith be snuffed out.

Straighten up! Lift up your heads and receive the Son of Man this day who comes to save so that you may receive Him with joy when He comes again. Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!

In the Name of +Jesus.

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord.