

10 November 2002
Third Last Sunday in Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“His Words are True”
Text: Matthew 24:15-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In much that I do, I try to plan ahead. As far as the Church goes, I look at the assigned readings that will be coming up and try to pick the hymns that will be sung a season ahead of time. At home, we try to plan financially for the future, we try to plan vacations a good deal ahead of time, we try to plan our gift-buying so we aren't scurrying around at the last minute, and always sending our gifts out late – although it seems that inevitably happens a lot of the time. But I try to plan ahead. Perhaps you are like this too. And not only in the ways I just mentioned, but in other areas as well. Planning for a career or future employment, planning to have a family, planning to buy your own house, or planning for retirement.

The thing is, planning for the future is difficult. And the farther into the future you try to plan, the more difficult it is! You don't know what is going to happen in our world, what events will impact you personally, what unexpected twists and turns lie ahead. Perhaps the phrase “expect the unexpected” is a good one for us to live by as far as the future goes. And actually, none of us knows whether or not we will be included in the future! For we know not when the call for each of us to leave this life will come.

And so with the arrival of the end of the church year, and the emphasis of our readings on the end times, perhaps these are difficult things for us to grasp. I know I have enough trouble trying to plan six months or even a year into the future, without also trying to think about the end of all things! . . . But the reason why we try to plan ahead, in so many areas of our life, is not so that we know everything that's going to happen, but to reduce stress, to feel confident about what's coming, to take care of what we can now, so that when the unexpected *does* come, down the road, it will not be so overwhelming, and we'll be ready to handle it. And so it is wise, also in the Church, to look ahead to the end, to see what's coming – not so that we'll know all the answers – but so that we live in confidence now, no matter whether the end comes next week, next year, or many generations in the future.

And so the Holy Gospel that we heard this evening can be a source of comfort for us, even though much of what it talks about doesn't sound very comforting! ***“The abomination of desolation . . . fleeing to the mountains . . . don't go back to get anything . . . pray that you're not pregnant when it happens, or that it is not the winter . . . great tribulation.”*** Doesn't sound too good! But it is important to understand that in our reading for today from St. Matthew, *two different events* are being described – first, the end and destruction of the city of Jerusalem, and then second, the end of all things. And these words that you just heard again, that sound so horrible, have, in fact, already taken place. Jesus foretold it to His disciples, and His words were true. And while many scholars and theologians have speculated about ***“the abomination of desolation,”*** and exactly what it was and when and how it took place, it has already taken place. Jerusalem and the Temple were desecrated and destroyed, and a great tribulation and persecution came upon the people. The facts of these words do not apply to us, and so don't worry about getting pregnant, or looking for the “abomination,” or be anxious about the coming of winter.

But while this destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple has already taken place, the enemies of God's people remain, and are not satisfied, and will continue to do battle against the New Jerusalem, the Church, and against the truth. And it will be a battle as intense and significant as the destruction of Jerusalem, although it will not be a physical battle, but a spiritual one. For it will not be led by armies, but as we heard, by ***“false christs and false prophets.”*** Their ammunition will not be bullets and fire, but ***“great signs and wonders.”*** And their goal will not be the conquest of a city or place, but the conquest of God's people, to ***“lead astray even the elect.”*** And this is where our attention is to be today. For just as Jesus foretold to His disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and His words were true, so also these words that He has spoken about the times that we live in today. We now live in the midst of this danger. ***“Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”*** And having crucified the Son of God and seen His corpse laid in a grave, the vultures have gathered to attack and eat His body, the Church. His words are true.

For there are a bewildering array of people in our world today who claim to know the truth. Many who claim a private revelation from God, many claiming to have found a new and different way, many who have a great following and great financial resources and can make their message look appealing and successful. There are also among us those today who display great signs and wonders. Healers, those who communicate with the dead, those who seem to know or do things that should not be possible, apparitions, visions, miracle workers. And whether these people or things are real or not, they are capturing the eyes and minds of many. And there is a conquest taking place, a “bloodless coup” – not only because it is not taking place through physical blood and death, but also

and more importantly, because it is taking place apart from the **blood of Christ**. Because while the *name* of Christ may be used by some of these who are doing or claiming these “**great signs and wonders,**” ultimately they end with a denial of Christ. They seek a way to God apart from the cross, apart from suffering, apart from the means that God has given. But to all of this Jesus says in the Gospel, “**See, I have told you beforehand. . . . Do not believe it.**” And His words are true.

You know, if it were simply a matter of physical violence and overthrow, it would actually be much easier. Easier to see, easier to know the good guys from the bad guys. But the threat is over our hearts and mind, over the faith and doctrine, and the truth. And it is being fought with deception and cunning. And in reflecting on this, listen to these words of Martin Luther:

“But how can we keep from being deceived, since some of the deceptions which come our way are very compelling? How can we keep from being misled? To learn such mastery or art requires that we truly be Christians. First of all, we must recognize that the devil is a very crafty and powerful lord – that’s why he is called lord and ruler of the world! – and that if our dear Lord and God does not counter and thwart his craftiness, cleverness, and power, there would be no one on earth wise, strong, and holy enough to withstand and survive against him. That is to say, with his knowledge, smartness, and power the devil far exceeds all human understanding and mental power. If God, therefore, were to withdraw His hand, the devil would quickly contrive an apparition before our eyes and take us in before we know it.” (House Postils, vol. 3, p. 200)

Now, you’re probably again thinking, “*I thought you said this reading would be a source of comfort for us!*” It still doesn’t sound very comforting! But we first must recognize the reality and the threat that we face, before we can be comforted by the Gospel. And there is Gospel here – Gospel that gives us confidence to face this future. For while our weakness and sin and lack of ability, and Satan’s strength and cunning and power make our situation seem quite hopeless, there is hope. **Because the future doesn’t depend on us**, in our weakness and sin and lack of ability, **but in Christ**. In Christ, the corpse who didn’t stay a corpse, but who rose to life and lives to keep His promises – His promises of keeping His own, of preserving His Church, of forgiving our sins, and of seeing His elect through these difficult and confusing times. And His Word is true. His promises are sure – as sure as “*He is risen from the dead, and lives and reigns to all eternity.*”

For in the Holy Gospel we are told that all of what the enemy will do will be toward the goal of “**leading astray, if possible, even the elect.**” But the point is that that is not possible! That is what Jesus is saying here. He is stronger and will keep His own. And this is what Luther was speaking of in the quote I read earlier when he said, “*If God, therefore, were to withdraw His hand . . .*” But God does not withdraw His hand! For though it may sometimes seem so, when we face hardships and difficulties, and it seems as if God doesn’t see or care, He does, and His hand is still with us. Protecting and guiding and keeping. For He will not – He cannot – forsake His own. That is what Job

found out, as we heard from him in the Old Testament reading. Recent events had made his future look not so bright, it seemed as if God had afflicted him for no reason or didn't care that he was afflicted. But God did not leave Job, and in fact, in just a few chapters after our reading, Job declares ***"I know that my redeemer lives!"*** For God is faithful, and His words are true.

And so what is the bottom line for you and I today? It is simply this: listen to what Christ says. He has told us beforehand what is going to happen, so that we can face the future, come what may, with confidence and hope. And so yes, there will be ***"false christs and false prophets"*** who will arise and deceive. We have been told beforehand. And yes, there will be those who ***"perform great signs and wonders"*** and deceive. We have been told beforehand. And yes, they will try to deceive not only those who are outside the church, but also they will try to ***"lead astray even the elect."*** We have been told beforehand. And so we know it will happen. . . . So do not be alarmed when these things happen, but listen to what Christ says! Stay in His Word. His Word which does not deceive, but tells you what is most sure and true. His Word which promises you that ***"those whom he [elected] he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."*** (Romans 8:30) And so were you called? Then you were elect. Were you called? Then you were justified. Were you called? Then you were glorified with Him. Were you called? Yes, that is why you are here. And as you were called by Christ through His Gospel, along with that call and faith came all the promises of God. And so He will keep you in His love and forgiveness until He returns on the last day, whenever it will come.

Listen to what Christ says. Do not be deceived. Stay in His Word. His Word joined with water in Holy Baptism which gave you new life and placed you in Christ. His Word joined with the bread and wine of Holy Communion which gives you strength and forgiveness and places Christ in you. His Word written and proclaimed, calling you into His love and fellowship. Listen to what Christ says. Stay in His Word. For, as Jesus said just a few verses after the Holy Gospel for today, ***"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."*** And His words are true.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.