

14 November 2010
Pentecost 25

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Good Ending”

Text: Luke 21:5-28 (Malachi 4:1-6; 2 Thess 3:1-13)

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

Life is filled with endings. When one thing or time in your life ends, and a new time or thing begins. And these endings can be both good and bad. For example: The end of school is good because it means the beginning of summer vacation, but the end of summer vacation is bad because it means the beginning of school. But whether an ending is good or bad also depends on your perspective. For a parent, the end of school may be bad because it means the beginning of having bored kids around all summer with nothing to do, and the end of summer vacation may be good because it means the kids are going back to school! There are other endings, too - many of them. The end of life of a loved one is bad or sad, but the end of their suffering may be good. The end of a job may be bad, or perhaps it is the opportunity for a good new beginning.

Life is filled with endings, but sometimes we don't want to think about them. That's why many people don't plan for the future - not preparing wills, or saving for retirement, or buying life insurance. That's why our government continues to run up the national debt without worrying about how it will be paid back. Things are okay now, so why bother? We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

But life is filled with endings, which come whether you're ready for them or not, want them or not, and whether you think they're good or bad. And so the Church, in her wisdom, in the last few weeks of her year, each year, calls us to consider and think about these things - the endings that are coming. The end of your life. The end of this world and time. These may come sooner to you, or they may come later, but of this you can be sure - they *will* come. And while you may cross that bridge when you come to it, the Church, at least, gets us to stop and think about it for a brief time each year. And to stop and think: *is this ending good or bad?*

How you answer that question is going to depend on your perspective. Just as with children and parents at the ending and beginning of school, so also the end of this world and time is going to mean different things to different people. The prophet Malachi told us today that for **the arrogant and evildoers**, that day will not be a good one! But for those who **fear the name of the Lord**, that day will be one of

healing and leaping and joy.

We also heard in the Holy Gospel today about the end of the temple, as when people pointed out to Jesus what a magnificent building it was, Jesus responded that ***“the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”*** And for many who heard those words, that was bad news! *But what if . . .* what if the temple would be destroyed because the temple was no longer needed? If the sacrifices were no longer needed? If the once and for all sacrifice - that all those sacrifices pointed to - was completed, and God and man were reconciled? If one greater than the temple was here? Then this destruction and ending would be good news indeed!

Jesus then goes on to say that there will be times of trouble and great distress - nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famine, pestilences, persecutions - bad stuff, bad news, right? *But what if . . .* what if all these things serve to make us loosen our grip on the things of this world? To remember that this world is not all there is? To cause us not find our value and meaning and purpose in life in what we have or accomplish, but in the one who loved us to death - literally! And to trust that while there are many endings in this world and life - which are often painful and hard - the beginning of that new life given to us by Jesus in Holy Baptism is the beginning of a life that *has no ending*. If these troubles and distresses serve than end, would that not be a good thing?

So what does this all mean? Well, with all these things, with all these endings, Jesus would have you know this: **that the reign of sin is coming to an end.** The sin that has perverted our human nature and made us less than our Lord created us to be. The sin that causes strife and discord in this world, and in families, and in churches. The sin that roars in sickness and disease, pain and loss, disasters and tragedies. The sin that is wearing us out, slowing us down, and will ultimately bury us in the grave. Its reign is coming to an end. And not only in you and I, but also in creation. God has told us that the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23) and so the ending for all of us is going to be death. But creation, too, was subjected to sin when Adam sinned; and so creation, too, is paying these wages, is in the travails of death, and so is coming to an ending, too.

But Jesus would have you know that these endings - while they sound terrifying and scary - are ultimately good news. Good news because of Jesus. Good news, for (as Jesus says), ***“when these things begin to take place,”*** - don't duck and hide! - but ***“straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*** Which is to say that after these endings is a new beginning. A new life, a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13), where sin and death are no more.

And this we know because sin and death were not the end of Jesus. On the cross, He paid the wages of sin that He did not owe, to redeem us and all creation from the debt that we did owe, that the end of our life and the end of this world and time would not be the end of our story. But that in Jesus' resurrection, would be our own. That in Jesus' resurrection, we have the beginning of a life that has no ending.

That is why the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion sound so much like the events surrounding the end of this world and time. For when Jesus was crucified, the sun stopped shining, the earth quaked, the dead were raised . . . and so when we hear Jesus talking about these things, we may think: is He talking about His crucifixion, or the end of this world and time? And the answer is: *yes!* Both. Because truly, Jesus' death and resurrection are the beginning of the end. The end of sin, and the beginning of His making all things new (Rev 21:5).

And so Jesus has shown us what the ending of our ending will be: a resurrection to a new life, in a "resurrected" new heavens and new earth. For the old passes away when the new comes. And so when Jesus came, the *old* temple passed away; *old* Israel passed away; the *old* testament with its sacrifices and priesthood and laws passed away. For the new had come. The *new* temple of God's abode with man in Jesus' body; the *new* Israel of the church; and the *new* testament in Jesus' Body and Blood. But these, too, will come to an end, when Jesus comes again. When the church militant becomes the church triumphant; when we move from our place at this feast, to the real wedding feast of heaven; when what we now believe, we shall finally then see - our Lord in all His glory. That is what the ending of our ending will be - good news of a new beginning, indeed.

But we're not there yet. The time is coming, and it is good to think on such things and consider them. But now is not the time - as Paul tells the Thessalonians - for idleness. Kids know that the end of the school year is coming, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't do anything and sit around and wait for it! If they do, that won't be a good ending with the beginning of summer vacation, but a bad ending with the beginning of summer school!

So too, for the Christian, it is not a time for idleness - there is work to do. For satan, with his weapons of sin and death, isn't slowing down. So for us there is work to do. Works of mercy, the work of forgiveness, the work of our vocations, which provide for other people. But these works we do not the make sure the ending is a good one for us - we already know that it will be as we live in Jesus, in His victory, in His forgiveness, in His life and resurrection. He has already promised us a good ending, and renews that promise to us every week as He gives us His forgiveness, life, and salvation in His own Body and Blood. So we work not for ourselves, but for others. That for them, too, the ending may be a good one. The coming of the end is a call to us to be *more* - not less! - engaged in our lives and world.

But to be engaged *in* this life and world, knowing that we are not engaged *to* this life and world! You see, that is the mistake many make, and so the things of this life and world become idols and false gods; what they love and what they live for, and so the ending of these things is bad. But not so for you. For while it is good for us to be engaged *in* this world and life, and to enjoy the things of this world and life, always remember that you are engaged *to* the Bridegroom who laid down His life for you. The Bridegroom, Jesus, who is coming to take home His Bride, the Church, to His kingdom which has no end.

And on that day, (again, as the prophet Malachi said,) ***you shall go out*** of your graves ***leaping like calves from the stall***. Or maybe, given the examples I used today, I should say: *leaping like kids on the last day of school*. But know that this ending will be one of great joy for you, and for all in Christ Jesus. For ***He is faithful***. ***He will establish you and guard you against the evil one***. Do not be afraid. But ***when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads***, - or in other words: stand on your tip toes in excitement! - ***because your redemption*** - your new beginning - ***is drawing near***.

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.