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Pentecost 25

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Glue Holding Our World Together”

Text: Mark 13:1-13; Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-25

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

The world is coming unglued. That’s what Jesus tells His disciples. Civilization coming unglued, creation coming unglued, religion coming unglued, and even families coming unglued. Pretty frightening words, all in all. All kinds of troubles, disasters, conflicts, and persecution.

But of course, this is nothing new. These things have been going on for a very long time. Almost from the very beginning. Because these are the fruits of sin. Because of sin, the peace and harmony of the world has been shattered. Because of sin, things are inside-out, upside-down, out-of-whack, and don’t work as our gracious God created and intended them to. That we still have what we need is only because God has not allowed sin to run its full course; because He is graciously providing springtime and harvest, restraining evil, and protecting and preserving His Church.

This is why we pray Lord’s Prayer. We pray that God would graciously give us all the things we need for this life and protect us from the evil one. Deliver us from evil, lead us not into temptation, give us our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, Thy name be hallowed . . . In fact, Luther wrote in the Large Catechism [Fourth Petition] that *“If it were in [the devil’s] power and our prayer (next to God) did not prevent him, we would not keep a straw in the field, a farthing in the house, yes, not even our life for an hour. This is especially true of those who have God’s Word and would like to be Christians.”*

So it’s not that these signs are new and have never been seen before. In fact, I wonder if the disciples might not have been a bit disappointed that Jesus didn’t tell them something much more definite and specific so they would know. People today are certainly looking for such specific signs, and I suspect the disciples weren’t all that different than us. But nonetheless, these are the signs that the end is coming, because these are the signs that sin is at work and that we need a Saviour.

Now, Daniel *does* tell us that when the end draws near these things will get worse. ***There shall be a time of trouble***, he says, ***such as never has been since there was a***

***nation till that time.*** Some try to use that as an indicator. And some look around at our day and age - at the wars, the disasters, and the persecutions that seem to be increasing - and think we must be drawing close. *Are we?* I don't know. But again, just as these signs have been going on for a very long time, so we're not the first generation to think we're living in the end times. Many of the early church fathers thought so, so did Luther. Turns out the world lasted much longer than they expected. Maybe for us too.

*But here's the thing:* even as our world and everything in it is coming unglued, **our Lord is not.** Did you notice that? In the words from Mark we heard today, even in the midst of all the troubles our Lord described, still He says, *the Gospel will go out into all the world, to all nations, and the Holy Spirit will be at work, testifying. Testifying to the cross* and the work of God for us there.

Testifying to the cross because that is what the Gospel is. The Gospel that will go out into all the world isn't just the feel good message that "things will be alright." Lots of people can say - or wish - that. But the message that the Son of God has come to make things right, that Jesus has come to *overcome* the sin that is ungluing the world through His death and resurrection and the forgiveness of our sin, that is the testimony of the Holy Spirit, of the Church.

For the Church isn't here just to make the world a better place. We can *do* that. There's nothing wrong with that. The political campaigns were full of that kind of talk. The folks who went to Atlantic City yesterday to help in the storm relief did that in a way. But then the next storm comes, the next war comes, the next layoffs come, the next hatred or persecution comes, and then what? Folks have been trying to make the world a better place for a long time, and its like trying to walk up the down escalator.

No, Jesus has come to do *more* than that. And so we do what we do, as the Church - with our proclamation of the Word, with our acts of mercy, in our Life Together - is testify to that. To testify that in the midst of a world coming unglued, and which will continued to come unglued, there is hope. Hope in the cross. The world can die on its own. And it is. Even science testifies to that. But Jesus has come to give life. Life after death. Whether it's your death or the world's death. There's only One who can do that.

And so when the Holy Spirit is at work, He isn't just doing "cool, spiritual things" like making people talk in funny ways and healing people - *His work is to direct people to and connect them to the cross.* This cross of Christ that is planted right in the middle of history; right in the middle of this world unglued by sin. Jesus allows Himself to be torn apart and ravaged by this sin on the cross, that in His resurrection He give healing and wholeness and health in forgiveness, or sin

overcome. For that is what makes the difference. **The cross - the death and resurrection of Jesus - is our hope.** Always has been. Always will be.

So in the midst of all these troubles spoken of by Jesus - when loved ones die, when persecution arise against you at school or at work or in the world, when wars continue (between nations and even between people), when parents deliver their children over to death in abortion and children deliver their parents to death in euthanasia, when false prophets arise and mislead many - and when these things even become the narrative of your life, don't be alarmed, Jesus says. ***These are the beginnings of the birth pains.*** Birth pains . . . pain that is real pain, convulsions, trauma, agony . . . but then it's over, and the joy begins. Tears of joy, new life. And the joy is more than the pain, isn't it? Otherwise, no woman would have more than one baby!

And so it is with the birth pains of the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth. The real pains, convulsions, trauma, and agony *now* will - because of the cross planted right in the middle of history; because of Jesus' death and resurrection - end in joy and new life. A new life that we have already begun to live actually, as through baptism Jesus already gave you that new birth. You have been born from above, born as children of God, children with the promise of eternal life, and so are now living a new life in an old world. So we shouldn't be surprised if there are conflicts; on the contrary, we should expect them. And even rejoice in them. That the cross has been planted in our lives. That the birth pains mean the new life is coming . . .

But until that day comes, the Gospel will go out and the Holy Spirit will testify, through the Church, through you. Through your words, through your life, through the Spirit of hope who lives in you. Or as the writer to the Hebrews put it:

***Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.***

*Therefore, he says. Because this is true. Because you have been washed in the waters of Holy Baptism and made new, because you have access to God as your Father, because you are no longer separated from Him by your sins but forgiven because of the death and resurrection of the flesh and blood of Jesus, our great high priest, because you have this confidence and faith, therefore . . .*

***Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who***

***promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.***

*All the more as you see the Day drawing near.* The Day when the birth pains will stop and the new life begin. As you see the signs, as you see that Day approaching, hold fast, hold on, and hold together. God did not create a billion individual Christians, but one Church, and we're in this together.

Or, to go back to the birth pains example . . . you women know all about those pains, but nowadays we husbands are there too. They try to teach us husbands how to be there for our wives and tell you how to breathe and all that. And you know what? *We're useless!* We really are. We do everything wrong. You husbands know it. I don't know how the nurses put up with us. We're there, we try, but in all honesty, the birth happens in spite of us. The greatest thing I think I ever did was get my wife a Big Mac after she was done with all the work!

Well, perhaps we can think of the birth of the new creation in a similar way. We need each other. We need our Church. We need to keep encouraging one another. We need to keep stirring one another up to persevere because it's easy - when all the trouble comes - to give up. Not that we can do it or help that new birth come - our efforts fall far short, don't they? We bumble our words, we do things wrong, we mess up . . .

But Jesus didn't say that in the midst of all the troubles and birth pains it would be us holding things together - *thank goodness!* - but the Holy Spirit. The Gospel and the testimony of the cross will continue to go out into all the world, to all nations, *because the Holy Spirit is working and will continue to work.* Even through apostles who failed as fishermen and were hated as tax collectors in their previous lives. Even through folks like you and me. *And the new birth will come.*

So as the Day approaches, as things go from bad to worse, as we worry about elections and fiscal cliffs, war in the Middle East, conflicts in our lives, and other concerns of all shapes and sizes, *what do we do?* We don't build bunkers or become "Doomsday Preppers," **we come here!** To this place of peace in the midst of chaos, this place of life in the midst of death, where the cross is still planted in the midst of troubled world, and we hear of and receive the work and life of our Saviour. His forgiving and renewing Word, His strengthening and sustaining Body and Blood, and His blessing. For truly, it is in the Body and Blood of Christ in which we are safe. His Body and Blood that reconciled us to the Father, His Body and Blood which now feeds and strengthens us, and His Body and Blood in which we too will pass through death to new life.

So as you see the end approaching, do not be afraid. ***The one who endures to the end will be saved.*** For your Saviour endured to the end. And in Him, remaining in Him and *His* strength, *so will you.*

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.