

25 November 2012
Last Sunday of the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Last Day: A Day of Joy”

Text: Mark 13:24-37; Jude 20-25; Isaiah 51:4-6

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

So, are you ready for December 21st? In case you haven't heard, that's the date some think the ancient Mayans predicted for the end of the world, since that's the day their calendar stops. Now, we don't really know that much about the Mayans, but that hasn't stopped some folks from believing that they had some sort of secret knowledge that enabled them to predict when the world was going to end. And, of course, the media and the internet are hyping this. There are television specials about it and if you Google it you will find millions of references to it.

But we shouldn't be surprised. The end of the world and predictions about it have fascinated folks for a long time and spawned many fanatical sects. Last year it was Harold Camping (twice!), this year it's the Mayans, and next year it will be somebody else. But they all have this in common: *they've all been wrong.* It is as Jesus said: **But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows.** And no one means no one. There is no secret knowledge, no code that needs decyphering in the Bible, no revelation to a select few. **No one knows,** Jesus says. **Not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son** (in His state of humiliation), **but only the Father.**

Now, the Mayans *may* be right - assuming they actually thought this and we just didn't lose the rest of their calendar! The odds are long, and it won't have been because of any secret knowledge, but they may have actually *accidentally* picked the right date when Jesus is coming back. Because this we know: *Jesus is coming back. There is an end.* On this the Bible is clear. Isaiah told us today, on that day **the heavens [will] vanish like smoke, and the earth will wear out like a garment.** Last week we heard Jesus speak about the signs of the coming of the end, and we heard more of those signs today. And last week we considered that even as Jesus spoke of these things, He also assured us that in the midst of these terrifying signs, *the work of God will not be stopped:* the Gospel *is* going out and the Holy Spirit *is* working. And that is what is happening today.

This week though, as we continue to hear about the approach of the end, Jesus adds an admonition: **stay awake.** Twice He says it. **Stay awake.** Don't let your faith doze off. Watch. Be ready. Think about it. Look for it. Wait with readiness for the

coming of that day, since you know not when it will be.

It seems to me that's worth considering a bit this morning because *there's all kinds of ways* to wait and watch. Jesus uses the example of servants and a doorkeeper who is commanded to stay awake - but still, *how* do they wait for the return of the master of the house? It seems to me there are a number of ways . . .

Sometimes we wait for things which much **joy** and excitement and anticipation, like children waiting for Christmas morning, or a couple waiting for their wedding day to arrive, or a military wife waiting to see her husband get off the plane after a long deployment. That is waiting that cannot wait for the day and moment to arrive.

But not all waiting is like that - sometimes we wait for things with much **fear** and **dread**, like when you have a big test coming up in school and you're not really prepared, or when the day for your surgery draws near, or when you are sitting by the bed of a loved one who is dying. That is waiting in the hope that the day and the moment will *never* arrive.

But then there is also the kind of waiting that numbs our brain in **boredom**. This is the proverbial husband waiting for his wife who is clothes shopping and trying on a hundred different things, or when you're waiting for your turn to come up at the DMV. That is waiting with the desire to do anything else and be anywhere else in all the world but there!

So how are you waiting for the return of Jesus and the end? Or maybe for you it is none of the above. None of the above because you're so wrapped up in your life that you give little thought to any of this. Or because it's only kooks and pastors at the end of the church year who talk about this.

Well, however you are, it's good to take some time - *at least* at the end of every church year - to consider this, *and maybe repent and change how you are waiting*, because (as we started to consider a couple of weeks ago) how you think about the end influences how you live now.

And it is Jude that gives us some words about that today. He says: ***But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.***

Now, on the one hand, notice how ordinary that all sounds. Because it is. It is because we need not fear the end, whenever it may come. We need not worry or

have great anxiety for that day and what is going to happen on it because for all who have been baptized into Christ, we already know how that day is going to turn out. You know because when Jesus hung on the cross He hung there with your sins He received there God's judgment for them and was declared guilty in your place. And so the judgment and condemnation for your sins has already been given. That's what the cross means for us.

And then when you are baptized, when you receive the words of absolution here in faith, you are hearing and receiving the same verdict that will be pronounced for you on the Last Day - the *not guilty* Jesus earned and won for you on the cross. So when that day comes, what will happen is that you will finally take full possession of the new life that is already yours as baptized child of God as your body is raised and glorified and changed to fit your new life in the new creation.

But until that day comes, our confidence doesn't mean we do nothing! Rather, since our confidence means we don't have to worry about it, or fear that day or dread its coming, until that day comes therefore, the death and resurrection of Jesus gives us the freedom to wait and watch and stay awake as Jesus admonished and as Jude described. To do these things as we wait. To do these things as we live in our daily vocations. to do these things as we live in the confidence of our Saviour's love and work for us.

So what are these things? Well, Jude says, until that day comes ***build yourselves up in your most holy faith***. Be immersed in what you believe. Don't wait for that day like you're at the DMV - read and study the Scriptures, dwell on them, and find Christ in them. In every book, in every chapter and verse, find the love of Christ for you. For that is what the Scriptures are - not a text book or an instruction book to cram for your final exam on the Last Day, but the words of your loving Saviour teaching you of his love and work for you. That you not fear but believe. That you not doubt but rejoice in Him. And immersed in the Scriptures, you will be built up, for the Holy Spirit works through the Word to do that very work. And so you *will be built up in your most holy faith*. The faith the Holy Spirit gives and will strengthen and keep in you.

Then, Jude says, until that day comes ***pray in the Holy Spirit***. The end times are a time for prayer, the Holy Spirit who comes to you through the Word prompting you and helping you in your prayers. To pray for yourself, for others, for all in every need. To pray for those who cannot pray; for those who sadly don't know how to pray. And the Holy Spirit who brings God's Word to our ears will in the same way bring our words, our prayers, to the Father's ears. ***Pray in the Holy Spirit***.

Next, ***keep yourselves in the love of God***. Keep being on the receiving end of His love for you - hearing His Word, taking in His words of forgiveness and life,

receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. For these are His loving gifts for you; His gifts by which He loves you and keeps you in His love. . . .

And ***waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.***

Notice those words: we're waiting *for mercy*, not judgment. Because for our Lord of mercy every day is a day of mercy, even the Last Day. For the *not guilty* we hear now and which will be spoken to us on the Last Day is in no way earned or deserved by us - it is mercy, the mercy of the cross. Mercy then, mercy now, mercy forever.

And then finally, ***have mercy on those who doubt.*** The mercy we receive we also give. We watch out for one another, care for one another, forgive one another, encourage one another, because we're in this together. As I said last week, we're not a billion individual Christians who happen to be living on earth at the same time - we're one, the Church, the Body of Christ. To be strong for others when they are weak, and for them to be strong when you are weak. To support each other and encourage one another, to have mercy on those who doubt or have fallen away, and to reach out in mercy to those not yet in the Church, not yet believing. Not approving of sin, as some are prone to do these days, but snatching them out of the fire - that no one miss the glory that is coming. That all may wait for that day not in a false security but in faith; not in dread but in joy.

For truly that will be for us a day of joy. As we sang in the first two hymns today, it will be the day of the beginning of the wedding feast of heaven which has no end. The wedding feast which Jesus has gone to prepare for us, and which He is even now preparing you for. For as Jude concludes, it is not you or your efforts, works, or piety that will prepare you for that day. This is Jesus' work as well, through His Word and Sacraments. He is the One ***who is able.*** Able to ***keep you from stumbling*** with His sure feet which trampled sin, death, and the devil. Able to ***present you blameless*** in His robe of righteousness which He gives to you.

For Jesus is the one the Last Day is really all about. His work, His life, His salvation, His gift. And so in Him you are safe. In Him you have life. In Him there is all joy as on that day we will finally see with our eyes what we now believe.

So if the Mayans are right and the end comes, Jesus comes, on December 21st, *that doesn't mean that we miss out on Christmas this year!* Rather, it just means we get to celebrate Christmas in a whole new way, the fulfillment of Christmas, the *real* Christmas - a joy and celebration which won't last for just a day, but which will have no end. *That's* the day that's coming. *That's* the day we're waiting and watching for. So let our joyful prayer be: come! Come, Lord Jesus! Come, O Bridegroom. Come, and take us home.

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.

(Thanks once again to Rev. William Cwirla for a few of the thoughts about the Jude reading included in this sermon.)