

13 November 2016
Pentecost 26

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Lord is Faithful, the Church Will Go On.”

Text: Malachi 4:1-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-13; Luke 21:5-28

Introit: Luke 21:33; Psalm 121:1-2, 5, 7-8

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

There have been people in every age who thought themselves to be in the Last Days and the End Times.

The early church and early martyrs thought the persecution and hatred of Christianity so bad that Jesus' return had to be close. But no, the world went on.

Later, during the dark ages, with the wars and barbarity and plagues, people thought surely this had to be the time when Jesus would come back, especially when the year 1,000 came. But no, Jesus didn't come then either.

Martin Luther thought his day had to be the Last Days, with the corruption in the church and the Muslims on the doorstep of Europe, close to conquest. Nope. Not then either.

Some thought the Cold War was surely the beginning of the end, that nuclear annihilation was imminent. Or when the year 2,000 came - some of you remember the hysteria then, of a cyber apocalypse that was going to wreak havoc and end life as we know it! But that all has come and gone, too.

And now, we hear such talk again with the election of Donald Trump. Surely the world is going to end now.

Well it might. Someone is going to be right sometime. Not that we should try to predict it, as the date setting folks do, claiming they've cracked a code in the Bible telling them when Jesus is coming back. Jesus was pretty clear on that one - you *don't* know and you *won't* know and you *can't* know (Matthew 24:36).

But that we look for the end, that we expect the end, **that's good**. Even if we're wrong, as all those folks I just mentioned were, it's good. Because that keeps us focused not on the things of this world that are passing away, but instead on our Saviour, who is coming again, and when He does, this old creation will come to an end. We don't know when He is coming, just that He will. He promised. And as Paul told the Thessalonians, **He is**

faithful. He keeps His Word. Or as we sang in the Introit: ***Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away***. They will come to pass. They will be fulfilled.

Now just talking about the end strikes fear in some people. Maybe you. It is unknown and the unknown often causes us to fear. So notice what else we heard in the readings today regarding this . . .

In Malachi, we heard that for those who *fear the name of the Lord*, for those who believe, on that day ***you shall go out leaping like calves from the stall***.

Paul told the Thessalonians that ***the Lord will establish you and guard you against the evil one***.

And in the Holy Gospel, Jesus said that ***not a hair of your head will perish***. And that while there will be ***people fainting with fear and forboding [at] what is coming on the world*** - which we saw a little of this week - not you! You, whatever comes, ***straighten up and raise your heads***, because your redemption is drawing near. No duck and cover for Christians! ***Do not be terrified***, Jesus also said.

Easier said than done, though, right? But go back to the Introit again, and the words of the psalm we sang today:

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

Because it's not coming from this old, dying creation! So no, not from creation, not from the hills -

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

The Lord who is *greater* than this world and creation.

The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand.

The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

***The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time forth - in this world and life -
and forevermore - and in the next.***

And we know that He will because of the words that bracketed that Introit; the words we sang both at the beginning and at the end, which I already mentioned earlier: ***Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away***.

The words of God will not pass away **because the Word of God made flesh did not pass away**. He died, yes, but He did not pass away. His life did not end. He was not overcome and conquered. No, His dying *fulfilled* the words and promises of God, so that death would not be the end for Him or for you. And so His resurrection ensured that though you will die - *unless Jesus comes first* - that though you die, you will not pass away either. Your life will not end either. You will not be overcome and conquered

either. You will pass from this life to the next, with your Saviour, with Jesus.

Such confidence enables us to live, then, without fear; to live in peace. We don't have to move to Canada, or enter a monastery and escape the world - those hills aren't going to help us. ***Our help comes from the Lord.***

And we have the example that Jesus spoke of today as well - that time when ***Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies . . . and trampled underfoot by the Gentiles.*** A time of great vengeance and distress. That happened when Rome came and leveled Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in the year 70 AD. But **the Lord was faithful, the church went on.** The Gospel was proclaimed. People believed and were baptized. The Lord's Body and Blood were given.

And so it was through all those times I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, when folks thought their day was the Last Days. **The Lord was faithful, the church went on.** Through persecution, through plague, through the threat of military conquest by infidels. **The Lord was faithful, the church went on.**

And so it will be today. For on the confession of Christ, the proclamation of His death and resurrection, and the giving of His forgiveness and life, *the church will be built, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it* (Matthew 16:18). **The Lord is faithful, the church will go on.**

But living in these days of distress give us, Jesus said, *the opportunity to bear witness.* And Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, living through their own difficult times, to ***not grow weary in doing good.*** For it is in just such times that the ears and minds of those who do not know or do not believe might be open. Open to hear of the hope that we have. Open to hear that all we see is not all there is. That there is one greater than all this, and that this greater one loves us and saves us.

And so we will pray again today, as many of you pray every day, *Thy kingdom come.* And we pray that because while the kingdom of God comes by itself, without our prayer, we pray that it may come to us also (Small Catechism). We pray that **Jesus** come to us also. On the Last Day, yes, but even now. That He come to us with His Spirit, to strengthen us. Come to us in His Word, to keep our faith fixed where it belongs. Come to us with His forgiveness, to purge us not only of our sins and wrongs, but also of whatever unbelief or misbelief or fear clings to our old flesh. And come to us in His Body and Blood, as *we lift up our hearts, as we lift them to the Lord,* and receive Him now. Practice for the Last Day.

Or, for your last day. For there may be a difference. Your last day may come first, from old age, from disease, from accident or tragedy, from persecution. But if you're ready for the Last Day, in Jesus, then your ready for your own as well, whenever it comes. And

you need not be afraid. Fear comes when we take our eyes off of Jesus. When we focus on the enemy and how big and powerful he looks. When we focus on death, when we focus on sin, when we focus on evil, when we focus on massive things that are beyond our control. And we should be afraid of those things . . . *if* we are outside of Jesus.

But in Jesus, no. In Jesus who defeated death in His resurrection. In Jesus who paid for the sin of the world on the cross. In Jesus who took on the forces of evil and won. In Jesus who made heaven and earth and so nothing is too powerful or too massive or beyond His control. In Jesus, we are safe. ***The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.***

So are we at the beginning of the end? Is this the time? Will it come in our generation? Actually, the beginning of the end began already, when Jesus ascended into heaven. Since that time, He could come back again at any moment. So yes, we're living in the end times. So keep your eyes focused on Jesus. Stay in His Word and Sacrament. Remember your baptism, when He made you His own child and gave you great and precious promises. Confess your sin and confess your Saviour. And ***do not grow weary in doing good.***

And then when that day comes when there is no tomorrow, that will be a good day. Not because all days are coming to an end, but because we will begin living in that day that has no end. The eternal day. The church with her bridegroom. For **the Lord is faithful, the church will go on.**

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.