

25 November 2018
Last Sunday of the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Looking Forward”

Text: 2 Peter 3:13b (Introit Antiphon)
Isaiah 51:4-6; Jude 20-25; Mark 13:24-37

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

What are you looking forward to? Many folks were looking forward to this holiday weekend and spending time with family and friends. Many are looking forward to the holiday season now before us, with its sights and sounds, and getting some time off, some time to rest. Or maybe you're looking forward to a new job, to finishing school, or something else awaiting you in 2019.

The Introit we sang today reminded us of something else, too, that as Christians we are looking forward to: ***We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*** The *home* of righteousness. Where righteousness is not just an occasional guest that comes and goes, or pops in now and then, but where righteousness stays and lives; where everything is always good and right. No sin. No death. No injustice. No division or separation. Where everything is as it is supposed to be.

And it will not just be the home of righteousness, it will be our home, too. We who now are broken and struggling, but then will be perfect and new. We who are lacking and weak, but then will be strong and complete in every way and lacking nothing. That *is* something, that is a home, to look forward to.

But the events leading up to that day . . . not so much. Isaiah spoke of those days, saying that ***the heavens*** [will] ***vanish like smoke***, and ***the earth will wear out like a garment***. Jesus describes it this way in the Holy Gospel we heard: ***the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken***. All of which *doesn't* sound like something to look forward to!

But it is, actually. Because then, after that, *will be Jesus*. He who died but then rose from the dead. He who came and will come again. Or again, as God put it through the prophet Isaiah, ***my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed***. My salvation, my Jesus, will be forever. My righteousness, my Jesus, will never be dismayed. For ***Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words***, Jesus says, ***will not pass away***.

Pass away. That's a phrase we use for dying. That's what we say: He or she has *passed away*. It means: they're dead. Sin won. Sin claimed its wages.

So heaven and earth, this world, this creation, if it's passing away, it's dying. Because it, too, is broken and struggling, lacking and weak. And one day it will pass away. Sin, the anti-life, will win again. Science has confirmed this Word of God, noticed this reality, too. Though it doesn't know of sin and cannot tell us what comes next.

But as Christians, we know what comes next. We know that those who die in Christ, those who pass away in Christ, will receive new life. They will rise from the dead, just as Jesus is risen from the dead. That's why while we are sad at the funerals of those who die in Christ, we also rejoice in this promise of God.

And so, too, when heaven and earth pass away. Though a frightening day, at the same time it will be a joyful day. For we know there is new life awaiting. In the one who paid all sin's wages on the cross. In the one who defeated death. In the one who provided a "next," a future, for us. In Jesus. For His resurrection means that sin didn't, in fact, win. He did.

And so as Jude reminds us today: ***He is able***. He is the one who is able. Able to keep us. Able to help us. Able to take us from death to life again; from this world to the next. For as we have remembered this whole church year, He Himself paved the way. He was born into this world to die, and then went through death to life; from this world to the next. **For you and me.** To provide a way for us. That where He is, we too may be. Jesus is able to do that. He is able to do what we are unable to do.

For this time that we are now living in, Jesus says, is like a man going on a journey, but who is coming back again. And who will come back at just the right time; in the nick of time. Just when everything around us is coming to an end and falling apart, all the chaos and catastrophe we heard of earlier, and we need hope. That is our hope. That is how we can look forward to the end. Because the end isn't just the end. The end isn't just the curtain going down on your life or on this world and there's nothing more. And the end isn't going to happen by accident. **The end is Jesus coming back.** He is *the alpha and the omega*, the Scriptures tell us. *The beginning and the end* (Revelation 22:13).

So as sure as this world, this creation, is here, just as sure is Jesus coming - not just to end it, but to re-create it. Make it new and good and perfect again.

So, Jesus says, watch for Him. Like we watch for the snow when a blizzard is coming. Like we watch for family to arrive when the holidays come. That is not an idle kind of watching, but watching and waiting with much activity and preparation and excitement.

But what does that look like? Such waiting and watching? We'll turn back to the reading

from Jude for the answer, who lists a number of things there:

But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray 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.

Those things are the same kinds of things we do as we wait for weather or for the holidays - only in a spiritual way.

To ***build yourselves up in your most holy faith*** is to get what you need before the day comes. Not from what's at the supermarket, but what's at the church - the Word, and the Body and Blood of Jesus, to feed you and strengthen you in your watching, to keep you from distraction and weariness, and to be strong in His forgiveness and life.

To ***pray in the Holy Spirit*** comes from that, for we respond to what we here receive from Jesus. He speaks, then we speak. Our guests say: *we're coming*, and we say: *yes, come!* Jesus says: *I'm coming*; and we say: *yes, come, Lord Jesus!*

Then also ***keep yourselves in the love of God and wait for His mercy***. The love of God first and foremost is His forgiveness. So keep your yourselves in this. Confess your sin and receive His absolution. Just as we keep in touch before the weather arrives or our guests arrive.

Have mercy on those who doubt - those whose faith is weak and wavering. Help them as we help our neighbors during a storm, or as we visit them during the holidays. Assure them of the love of God for them in Jesus. Point to His manger, point to His cross; to see the love of God.

Save others by snatching them out of the fire, Jesus says. Warn them about sin, do good for them when they're suffering in sin and its consequences. Like when storms hit or the holidays come, and communities often come together, neighbors help each other. Why just then?

And not getting caught up in sin, either, ***hating even the garment stained by the flesh***. Not hating our neighbors or turning away from them, but turning away from sin and the things of sin, and staying focused on the coming one, on Jesus. Waiting for Him. Watching for Him. ***Lest He come suddenly and find you asleep***. Lest He come and find that your faith has given way to the things, the concerns, the desires of this world. Lest He find that instead of turning away from sin and focusing on Him and His forgiveness, we've turned away from Him and His forgiveness and focused on . . . well . . . *me*. What I think, what I want, what pleases me, what benefits me only. If that's my focus now, that

will be my focus also when the end comes - and so it will be a day of worry and fear, trying to protect and preserve me and what I have.

But if instead we are waiting and watching for Jesus, if our focus is not on me but on Him, then when the end comes - when **HE** comes! - then it will be a day of joy. A day not of loss but of gain. A day not of death but of life. An end, but also a beginning. The day of *the new heavens and the new earth, the home of righteousness*. A day to look forward to.

So . . . are you? Are you looking forward to that day, or are you too near-sighted? Are you waiting and watching for it, or too busy, too consumed by the tyranny of the present? It's tough, isn't it? We triage our lives, and there's stuff that needs to get done now, and stuff that we can put off. And so we do.

So the end of the Church Year is good for us. It gives us glasses to correct our near-sightedness and enable us to look ahead, to look forward to the end and Jesus coming again. And to triage our lives rightly, and know what really matters, and what doesn't. And to know that when that day comes, it will be a day of joy. The day we've been looking forward to. For the same Jesus who comes to us now, here, hidden in water, words, and bread and wine, will be the Jesus who comes then, in glory. And all the family of God will be home. Our brothers and sisters in Christ from the beginning of time to the end of time, and from every peoples, tribes, nations, and languages. That day will be all the holidays - Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, Easter, birthdays - all rolled into one big celebration. A joy unlike any other. For that's what Jesus has done for us. For you.

So are you looking forward to that day? Yeah. And maybe looking forward to that day will help us get through today, too. With a little more confidence, a little more peace, and a little more joy.

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.