

12 November 2006  
Third-Last Sunday in the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“The Birth Pains of Our New Life”

Text: Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 12:26-29; Mark 13:1-13

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

As we enter the last few weeks of the Church Year, the attention of the Church is drawn to the End Times – the fact that this world and life is not going to last forever, but is going to end. Exactly when, we do not know. Maybe sooner, maybe later. But if you’re like most people, you’re *hoping* for later! Because by the descriptions that the Bible gives us of what those end times will be like, you really don’t want to be around when they happen! We heard from the prophet Daniel that “*there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been . . .*” It’s not going to be pleasant, and it’s not going to be easy.

But, you know, it’s *already* not easy! It’s not easy living in this world and life. It’s not easy when you or a loved one face disease and uncertainty about the future. It’s not easy when you see disasters on TV wiping out cities and towns. It’s not easy when people around us die. It’s not easy when people cheat us, or lie about us, or hurt us, or ridicule us. It’s not easy when we see so many turning away from the Christian faith and chasing after what cannot save them. *This life’s already tough!* The physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. The pain, doubts, and griefs. The questions and uncertainties. The things of this life often shake us (Heb 12), don’t they? And if it’s going to get worse . . .

And it is going to get worse.

It is going to get worse, first of all, because **Satan** knows that as we draw closer to the end, his days are numbered, and his time is drawing short. Therefore, like a wild animal backed into a corner, he is not going to let up and stop fighting, but in fact fight harder and more ferociously than ever – increasing his attacks against Christians, increasing his lies and temptations, doing everything in his power to increase the sin and evil and death in this world, and to destroy faith in Jesus Christ. And you can see it happening in our world today.

And it is going to get worse, secondly, because of **sin** – the sin in the world, and the sin in us. The sin that causes us to hurt each other. The sin that makes us selfish and self-

centered. The sin that convinces us to trust in the things of this world for the answers to our problems – to trust in our own efforts; to trust in governments, courts, laws, and politicians; to trust in the love and goodness that we think is deep down in every person. But these idols of our own making are spawning many of the problems we see today, and rather than making this world a better place, are doing exactly the opposite.

And it is going to get worse for one more reason . . . *and this one may surprise you*. It's going to get worse because of **God**. Because of the “divine shaking” of God that we heard in the reading from Hebrews. For by this divine shaking, our Heavenly Father is going to “*[remove] the things that can be shaken – that is, the things that have been made – in order that what cannot be shaken may remain.*” And so He is going to shake our idols in this world – all that we put our trust in here – to show us how untrustworthy these things really are. *And so have you been shaken in your life?* Good! Stop trusting in yourself and your own efforts! *Were you shaken by some of the recent election results?* Good! Be a good citizen and vote, but stop putting your trust in the government to solve our problems. *Do some of the things you see on the news shake you?* The wars, natural disasters, the rise of Islam, the continuing disregard for the sanctity of human life? Good! Thank God that He loves us enough to shake us up. To take away our idols. To do what is best for us, that we trust only in Him.

And know . . . it's only going to get worse. For the time is running short.

But also in all this, Jesus says, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid because these are “*just the beginning of the birth pains.*” And that picture gives us quite a different perspective on all of this. For while it acknowledges the troubles and the pain, the working of Satan and sin, the groaning and the convulsions of creation – Jesus tells us to see these things not as troubling things, but actually as hopeful signs. To see these things as *the contractions of the new creation*. The contractions that seem to be getting harder and closer together . . . because that's what happens when the time is short; when the delivery is near. And while that pain is severe and that time difficult – for both mother and child – the joy in the end is even greater! The joy of new life.

And so these last days are not a time of fear and anxiety for the Christian, for you and me, but in fact, just the opposite – a time of joy and hope! For like a woman in labor, we know the pains are not the end, but the means to new life. The means to kill the old, sinful man in us, that clings to the things of this world and that trusts in our own abilities – so that we may repent, cling only to Christ, and trust only in what *He* has done. To trust only in what He *did*, when **the days were accomplished for Him to be delivered.** (Lk 2:7) When the Son of God was born in human flesh, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger, *for only one reason*: to provide the way to the new creation. To provide the

way through death to life, for that is the path that He took, in His death and resurrection. His death and resurrection that triumphed over our sins, over our death, and over the devil, so that joined to Him by grace through faith, His victory is our victory, and His life our life. And His life is the life of the new creation, the new birth of water and the Spirit (Jn 3), where *we* are delivered and born again.

And that life you have been given, *already now*, in Holy Baptism. You have been forgiven and washed clean and snatched from Satan grasp . . . though you are not yet delivered from the pain and death of this world. That day *is* coming, though. For some of us sooner, for some of us later. Until it does, we may not look very much like a new creation! As individuals, as a congregation, or as a Church. And while it may look like we, and our congregation, and our Church, and our world is suffering through violent *death throes*, it is the cross that tells us the very different reality, and the wonderful, comforting truth: that in our Saviour, in Christ Jesus, *death throes have been transformed into birth pains!* And that for all who are joined to Christ, death and the end of this world are now simply the gates to the joy of new life. The joy of Heaven, which will never end.

And so just as you have already been given this new life now, so too the joy of Heaven is yours already now. Joy in the face of suffering and pain, yes – but also joy in the presence of your Saviour, as He comes to you even now. As He comes with His forgiveness, life, and salvation *here* – forgiving our sins in Holy Absolution, giving new life in Holy Baptism, and feeding our faith and strengthening us in His salvation with His body and blood in Holy Communion. And by these means sustaining us, that we ***endure to the end*** – not because of our own power, reason, and strength! But because of Him. Because He is the author and perfecter of our faith. (Heb 12:2) Because He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion. (Philipp 1:6) Because He has given us a kingdom that cannot be shaken, because He Himself is the cornerstone! (Eph 2:20)

***“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe . . .”*** And what else is acceptable worship but to come to Him who gives such gifts to men with humble and contrite hearts, in reverence and awe confessing our sin, and receiving the gifts He here gives to us. The gifts of faith. The gifts of new life. The gifts of Heaven. The gifts that are here for you, for your God knows what you are going through! For He came and went through it, and knows exactly what we need. These birth pains are no surprise to God. As bad as things may seem, they are not out of His control. There is a purpose and a reason for it all – a good and godly purpose and reason: ***the proclamation of the Gospel to*** [you and me and] ***all nations***. For many will not listen when times are good and things are easy. Only when things get shaken. And so God will shake, that all may be saved.

For that is the good and gracious will of God. And that as we see all manner of things happening around us – buildings tumbling, temples crumbling, and nations grumbling! Kingdoms and governments rise and fall, persecutions, and convulsions – that we fear not, but turn to Him. That we fear not, but *rejoice!* That we fear not, but know that the new life is almost here!

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.