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Pentecost 23

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Waiting for Eternity”

Text: Luke 21:5-36; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-13

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

Last week, we considered what life will be like in eternity. How different it will be when we are raised from the dead into a new and very different life. A life hard for us to imagine and wrap our minds around. Our minds that only know of this world and life and how things work here. But though difficult for us to understand, it is a life that will be wondrous and worth waiting for.

But not easy waiting for. That’s what we heard from Jesus today. Last week was what life will be like in eternity. This week, what life will be like here and now as we wait for that Day to come. As we wait for Jesus to come again in glory and take home His Bride, the Church. And it’s not a pretty picture.

In the words we heard today, Jesus spoke of a great many signs - some of which have already happened, some still happening, and some maybe still to come.

He said **the Temple will be utterly laid waste**. That’s happened. And there’s a mosque there now, on the Mount where the Temple used to be.

False Christs will come. False teachers. We’ve seen that. Also false prophets of the end. Calling people to follow them. Claiming secret knowledge.

Next were ***wars and tumults. Nation rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom***. It’s hard to imagine a time when men and nations and kingdoms aren’t fighting - somewhere, somehow.

Then Jesus mentioned ***earthquakes, famines, pestilences***. Yes to all three. ***Terrors and great signs from heaven***. That’s a little harder to put a finger on. But maybe these are happening. Maybe these are still to come as well.

Persecution and hatred. We’ve seen Christian martyrs around the world in our lifetimes, though the persecution in our country tends to be more subtle - but persecution nonetheless. But with shootings specifically targeted at Christian

schools and churches, Charlie Kirk, removing conscience clauses for Christians . . . maybe the persecution and hatred is becoming more overt here, too.

The fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD fulfilled what Jesus said about ***Jerusalem surrounded by armies*** and its ***trampling*** and ***desolation***.

And then Jesus talked about ***signs in sun and moon and stars, distress of nations, perplexity, the powers of the heavens shaken*** . . . This is the picture of a world destroying itself. A world being eaten away by sin and death. A world groaning and lurching through time to its end.

This is the world we live in now. And it's not easy. It's not easy to witness, it's not easy to endure. And I don't think I need to tell you that. You maybe know that better than me, and maybe have experienced it more than me.

Now, to know all this, and to know that it's coming, is one thing. More important is: *What do we do, how do we live, how do we endure all these signs of the end?* Signs that Christians have been seeing and living through ever since Jesus ascended. For while some of these signs have been with us ever since sin entered the world, some began when sinful men hung up their Creator on a cross. There were some of these signs then that indicated something was very wrong. The sun stopped shining, a great earthquake, the dead coming out of their tombs, fear and distress. For **Jesus' crucifixion was the beginning of the end**. Once Jesus ascended, the End Times, the vigil, the watch for His return, began. For He could come back at any time. Many thought He would come soon. Turned out, no. Some two thousand years have gone by and we're still waiting. Which some interpret to mean He will *never* come. But Scripture tells us this is just God being patient and waiting for all His sheep to be gathered. But come He will. As surely as He came as a baby, so will He come again in glory.

But back to our question, which we haven't answered yet! *What do we do, how do we live, how do we endure all these signs of the end?* And the answer Jesus gives is surprising . . .

Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

That answer is surprising, I say, because usually, when we see frightful things like all that Jesus described taking place, we do not ***straighten up and raise up our heads***, but duck and cover! Keep your head down. Try not to be noticed. Seek shelter. Run the other way. But that's not what Jesus says to do. In fact, He says, *Do the very opposite!* **Stand up and stand out**. Do not be afraid. Because what is drawing near is

not your doom but your redemption, your eternal life.

Now that's not easy to do. Stand up and stand out! Counterintuitive, you might even say. And something we might need training for. Like with first responders and the military today. They go through lots of training so that when the heat of battle comes, they know what to do. That when everyone else is running *away*, they are running *toward* the fight, *into* the battle. It is what Jesus did for us. He did not run from the cross, but even after being filled with agony and distress in His prayers in the Garden, went to the cross, laying down His life for the life of the world. Because He knew that was the day of the world's redemption; He the atonement for our sin. So He ***straightened up*** His back to take the flogging, He ***raised up His head*** to wear a crown of thorns. He was **the Temple of God utterly laid waste** while His enemies rejoiced. But in the end He was the one who emerged victorious; who emerged *from the grave* victorious. He conquered death, broke the grave, placed His heel firmly on satan's head, and then said to His disciples: *Peace be with you*. Peace in the forgiveness of your sins. Peace in the promise of eternal life. Peace, for He would now be with them, *always*, to the end of the age. And after that, *they would be with Him* in Paradise.

That's the peace that we now have, even in a world in distress, with so many frightful and fearsome signs of the end. The peace of being *in* Jesus, and the promise of being *with* Him in eternity.

So until that day, Jesus says, ***when these things begin to take place*** - and they are! - ***straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near***. And that we do is why we come here. That we do *out there*, is why we come *in here*. Here we receive the peace, faith, forgiveness, life, and salvation we need. Here we ***straighten up and raise our heads*** in safety, training for when we go back out where it's not so safe. So that when we see these things taking place, we *don't* duck and cover, we *don't* cower and hide, we *don't* run away, but confident of our Saviour and His victory and life, we instead stand up and stand out with the message of salvation. And thus **keeping our heads while the world loses theirs**, proclaim the hope we have, the sure and certain hope we have in Jesus.

And this is what Jesus said at the end of His words we heard today. He said, ***stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man***. And praying means not just our individual prayers, but what we do here, praying the liturgy, together. And the *strength to escape* is the strength we receive here in our Lord's Word and Sacrament. His strength, His Spirit, given to us. And *standing before the Son of Man* is also what we do here, for He comes to us here with His forgiveness, without which no one can stand before Him. But *with* His **forgiveness**, we can. And

with His **life** we can go out into a dying world, like first responders to the injured, and fighting against the gates of hell that Jesus promised could not stand against His Church. We go out confident, because we know **the victory has been won**.

And we go out with this promise, too: ***Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away***. So in this world where there is very little you can count on, very little that is solid and will not change and let you down, you can count on the words of Jesus that will not pass away. When He says you are My child in the waters of Baptism, *you are*. When He says you're forgiven, *you are*. When He promises you eternal life, *you have it*. When He says this is My Body and this is My Blood, *it is*. When He says He will never leave you or forsake you, *He won't*. And these words and promises are stronger and more sure than *anything* in this world, because *everything* else in this world is passing away. But not Him. Not Jesus. Because He did, once, already. Pass away. Die. But now risen from the dead He cannot die again. He is eternal, His life is eternal, and **so are all who are in Him**.

Then, finally, Jesus pointed to the trees as signs of the passing of the seasons. It is our annual reminder of death and resurrection. The death of this world, the winter of our sin, and the resurrection that is coming. But instead of eating and drinking and getting drunk to forget our troubles for a while, we eat and drink here to remember - *do this in remembrance of Me* - we remember our Saviour and look forward to His coming. We lift up our heads and lift up our hearts. And we do not keep quiet, but give Him thanks and praise, as it is good, right, and salutary to do.

And so you will be ready, when Jesus comes again in glory, **for He has made you ready**. As the apostle Paul said, ***the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one***.

So when you see these things, these signs, in the world, in your life, ***straighten up***, stand up, ***and lift up your head!*** Do not be afraid. Boldly proclaim your Saviour in word and deed. For ***your redemption is drawing near***. Your Saviour is drawing near. Drawing near to save. Drawing near **for 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.