

It's Nearly Summer; Christ is at the Gates!

Mark 13:24-37

Sunday of the Fulfillment

November 25, 2018

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

Our text, Jesus exhorts us, "Stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Is this Gospel reading a text to *fear* or a text in which to eagerly *rejoice*? Isn't that often the struggle for these 'Last Day' texts – we know they belong to a gracious God, but they seem so ominous. So, how are we to benefit from them and take them to heart and know that, yes, even these ominous sounding texts about the End of Days, even these do inform *daily* life.

In meditating upon this text of St. Mark, we ought consider it in the three paragraphs in which we see it on the page. In the first paragraph, Jesus tells us the simple facts. In the second paragraph, he teaches through parable. In the final paragraph, he admonishes and exhorts. So, let's consider each paragraph, and we'll gain an appreciation for Jesus' rather simple teaching of a rather difficult-to-grasp topic: the Second Coming.

The first paragraph teaches us that the Last Day will be all about the Church's comfort, rescue, and vindication. It's hard to see

this in the English, unless we know our Old Testament well. When Jesus mentions the sun darkening, the moon not giving light, the stars falling from heaven, and the powers of the heavens being shaken, he's doing nothing other than referencing what the Old Testament had already proclaimed. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel – they all speak of these images, and they include some pretty intense language. In fact, in Ezekiel, the Lord describes these things as happening to the wicked “When” (He says), “When I blot you out!” And, in Joel, the prophet laments, “Who can endure it!” Yes, if today or tomorrow or any day in our earthly life we see the heavens imploding and God preparing to blot out His enemies, that would seem pretty ominous, to say the least.

Isn't this why the forgiveness of sins is so important? As we said last week, any and every false gospel points you away from your reliance upon the forgiveness of sins in the blood of Jesus. But, if we are not covered by the blood of Christ, then we are enemies of God... and who can possibly endure it, who can possibly stand, when God is ready to blot out his enemies?

But, that ominous, indeed dreadful, image can and (actually) should evoke in us much comfort and joy when we hear Jesus begin our text this way, “In those days, *after that tribulation...*” He's speaking to the faithful, isn't he? The faithful who know they are now enduring the great tribulation. Of each who dies in the faith, does the elder of Revelation not declare to St. John, “These are the

[faithful] coming out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Yes, if *our* tribulation is now, constantly wrestling the Old Adam, suffering the darts of Satan, and enduring life in a world and society that detest the Gospel... then “after that tribulation,” Jesus says... then the End will come.

And notice, if the description of the sun, moon, and stars is all a reference to the Old Testament, then what is Jesus himself adding to that first paragraph? Namely this: “After that tribulation, they will see the Son of Man coming, and he will gather his elect.” That’s it! For you who penitently confess your sins and hope in Jesus, that’s it! The End is not ominous, but is splendid! After the tribulation, the Son of Man will come with his angels, and he (not just *they*, as if doing the bidding of a disinterested God), but *he* (in the Greek – *singular*, “He will gather his elect” from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heaven.

Consider the weekly practice he gives you to anticipate that Last Day. Weekly, He gathers you. Weekly, he forgives you, and strengthens you, and sustains you. – “This is the Gospel of the Lord,” we hear the refrain. “This is the Feast of Victory” we rejoice. “This is My Body and Blood,” he gives to you. And, each and every Sunday, not just as a dry-run, nor as a simple reminder, but as a source of strength for endurance, he gathers you together in anticipation of the End.

And that means, the second paragraph of our text is also one of joy and splendor. Hear Jesus' parable again:

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

This splendid little parable corrects our vision of the Last Day.

Sometimes, when we think of the Last Day, we might equate it with the ‘end’ of the year, like life is falling from the trees and the blast of cold isolation is coming. But Jesus says, “No, the End Day is like the break of summer, and your anticipation of it is the new life of spring, as you see the tender shoots putting out the evidence of new life, and you get ready for the excitement of the season of *growth and fruit.*”

So also for the Christian when he sees the signs that Christ is at the gate – that is not an ominous foreboding, as if a strongman is about to overtake us; it is joy and eager anticipation of those who are finally being vindicated. In fact, in the Greek, the word for summer is *theros*, t-h-e-r-o-s... the word for gate is *thuros*, t-h-u-r-o-s. When we hear that Christ is at the gate (*thuros*), it ought bring us the joy and excitement that the eternal summer (*theros*) and its life is here!

Consider how Rahab must have felt when, living in that wall of Jericho, she was promised by Joshua's spies that she and her family would be spared. Then, when Joshua, leading God's people,

was standing at the gates, and the trumpets sounded and the walls came crashing down, her home, though a part of that very wall, was still standing (indeed, the archeological evidence shows one window, and one little home, in that wall still standing, with the towers and wall of the faithless having been brought to nothing).

With the joy of Rahab, who realized that her Joshua had kept his promise, so also our Joshua, our Jesus – as he keeps his promise, we can delight in the signs that He is coming again and is even now at the gates. That’s what his Word promises, and therefore that’s where our hearts rest. Does he not even comfort us by promising that “this generation will not pass away” – and how does he qualify what he means by ‘this generation’? He says, “My Word will not pass away.” So “this generation” includes all who hold fast to His Word... we may sleep in the grave, but we will not pass away and perish into eternal death... we will be raised and we will be vindicated.

And, if such certain vindication is ours, then the final paragraph now makes perfect sense. It makes perfect sense why Christ would become very serious, solemn, and sober in exhorting us to “Be on guard, keep awake!” It makes perfect sense because you have nothing to gain, but everything to lose in growing complacent and sleeping in the idle mirth and merriment of ‘your best life now.’ How tempting it is to consider that which is most pleasing and gratifying – to the stomach, the eyes, the mind – rather than consider that which is true and pure and godly. And, if you don’t

consider yourself in jeopardy of that, if you think yourself too faithful for such complacency, then consider that Christ exhorts you to stay awake in this text *three times*, and amidst those three exhortations reminds you that the master may come “when the cock crows”... and, here – filling our minds – is the image of Peter weeping bitterly after the cock crowed, because he had not stayed alert of the dangers to his faith; he had denied Christ three times, and he was no less a denier of Christ than was Judas.

So, if Judas denied Christ, if Peter denied Christ just hours after vowing he never would, even unto death, then do you have any less reason for Christ to peer into your soul and say, “Stay awake”? What in all the world can be more important than holding fast to Christ, for He alone has authority to bring His Church to life everlasting. So, the words of our Epistle Reading reverberate in our ears, “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.”

Now, this is perhaps the point in which our Lutheran instincts kick in and we say, “But I can’t do it! I’m not strong enough to remain faithful! I cannot by my own reason or strength...!” And, you’re right. By your own strength you are no match for the tempter. Peter relying on himself, Judas relying on himself, Solomon, David, Samson... all of them, relying on themselves, ‘fell asleep’ if you will, were easily toppled by the devil, and fell away. And it was only by

God's grace in the forgiveness of sins purchased by the blood of the Lamb that any of them was restored and preserved.

Yes, that Lamb went forth and died for each of them and all of them; His blood atoned for all the sins of all the world, and that means it atoned for yours as well. And he distributed that forgiveness to all who believed on his name, that they too would know the restoration and preservation that comes from his love.

So also for you, as you utterly depend upon the forgiveness of sins and upon the strength of Christ's commitment to you, as we are "waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ" to appear on that glorious day of the eternal summer... as we do, we may take comfort in these words of our epistle reading:

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy..."

Notice that? It's God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ who keeps us prepared for the Last Day – He keeps us from stumbling; oh yes, we sin daily and sin much and sin shamefully; and yet, we are kept in God's grace not by the strength of our faith, but by the strength of the one in Whom we trust! He keeps us from stumbling and presents us *blameless*: we pray 'Lord Christ, I am a wretched sinner and deserve no standing before the Almighty!' and He covers us with his righteousness and "*presents us blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy*"!... and he does it through the blood-bought

forgiveness of sins, distributed in Word and Sacrament. Consider the confession of the psalmist from our introit:

And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?

My hope is in you.

Deliver me from all my transgressions

(that's the forgiveness of sins! – and where you have *forgiveness*, you will have *vindication*, so that the psalmist continues,)

Do not make me the scorn of the fool!

(and where you know God will vindicate, then you have every reason to depend upon him in all things, so that the psalmist concludes,)

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry.

Friends, that's the cry of faith, the prayer of dependence, the hope in the promises of God in Christ Jesus. Because you have Christ crucified, you have the forgiveness of sins in Word and Sacrament. And, because you have the forgiveness of sins, then you have union with Christ, so that – as Rahab before you – you need not fear when your Joshua stands at the gate. When the earth's walls crumble, you will be safe with Jesus. Joshua's spies only told Rahab, 'Be prepared.' So stay awake and keep alert, for the Lord promises at the end of our Old Testament reading, "my salvation will be *forever*."

Think about that marvelous truth! God's salvation will be *forever*. Sometimes, we think of salvation as something that "happened." (Which it did, secured forever, once for all!) But it's not

so much that it happened – completed action and that’s it; rather it *has* happened, *has* come to pass... a completed action with a ‘forever’ consequence. Its “once-for-all, secured-forever” truth will last forever. That’s just a slight bit more than ‘head and shoulders’ above “your best life *now*.” Salvation will be *forever*... for, even when heaven and earth pass away, His Word does not pass away.

So, even though salvation cannot yet be seen, stay awake, stay alert. For, even in this season of late fall, even with the season’s first winter storm bearing down on us, the tender shoots of Christ’s promised return are all around you, and the fruit of **summer** will soon be abundant, for Christ is at the **gates!**

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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