

YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR

Luke 21:5-28

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

November 17, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 21, verses 5 through 28. It is on page 745 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 21, beginning at verse 5, we read in Jesus' name.

⁵ And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." ⁷ And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" ⁸ And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. ⁹ And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."

¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

²⁰ "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹ Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, ²² for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. ²³ Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. ²⁴ They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

²⁵ "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

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You may be seated.

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

Dear saints, we should be hopeful. This world is a messed up place. There are wars. People do awful things to other people. There are natural disasters. We have earthquakes and fires and floods and famines and blizzards. I know; Jesus didn't say anything about blizzards, but if he lived in North Dakota he probably would have. Whether it's an attack from people or even from nature itself, the world seems bent on destroying itself. And Christians should be hopeful. We should be joyful. We should look to the sky with optimistic expectation.

This is one of the many things in the Christian faith that seems backward. Why would we be joyful in the midst of evil? Let's be clear: we are not joyful *because* of the evil; we are joyful *despite* the evil. Evil reminds us where to look for hope. We look to Christ. We wait for his return, and this gives us joy. When we see evil and destruction around us, we acknowledge that these things are bad. We should weep over loss and death. We should mourn for others who suffer. And we should comfort where we can. We should work to curtail evil whenever we have the opportunity. But we should not be surprised, and we should be hopeful in the face of suffering, because it reminds us that something better is coming.

Jesus says—and this could be the theme verse for all teaching on the end times—Jesus says, **“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”** (21:28).

This gospel lesson, like last week's, takes place during holy week. On Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. On Thursday evening he will institute the Lord's Supper. On Friday afternoon he will be hanging on a cross. By the time the sun goes down on Friday he will be dead and in a tomb. And early on Sunday morning he will step out of that tomb.

But there's some time in between Sunday and Thursday, and he spends a big chunk of that time teaching. Some of that teaching angered the Pharisees and Sadducees, which helped bring about Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. But this passage, where Jesus teaches about persecution, the destruction of Jerusalem, and his return, is just for the disciples. If you're looking for that detail in Luke, you won't find it, but Matthew and Mark also record this passage, and they specify that it was a private conversation between Jesus and his disciples. It begins as they're leaving the temple, and most of it continues on the Mount of Olives, which was across the valley from the temple mount. So Jesus and his disciples can see the temple across the valley as he teaches them these things.

And it's important to remember that this takes place during holy week. Jesus doesn't actually say anything about his death and resurrection in this passage, but it's foundational to everything he teaches. So we remember the historical context, and that will help us understand the significance of these events.

It starts with some of his disciples noticing the great stones and costly offerings the temple was built with. This is as they are leaving the temple. But Jesus doesn't seem very impressed.

Now a little bit of history for you: This was the second temple. The first temple—the one King Solomon built—was destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians. This second temple was built on the same site seventy years later, in 516 BC. However, the second temple paled in comparison to the glory of the first. So, eventually, Herod the Great—the guy who was king when Jesus was born—started a massive project to renovate the temple in a more glorious fashion. This project

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started in 20 BC, and was finally completed in 64 AD, long after Herod the Great died. So as Jesus and his disciples were talking about this, they could see the temple transforming into a glorious and very expensive building. And it's during the middle of this renovation that Jesus says, **"The days will come when there will not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down"** (21:6). Before the temple is even finished, Jesus prophesies its utter destruction.

The disciples associate the destruction of the temple with the end of the world. They can't imagine a world with no temple. This is the center of their worship. Surely God would not allow such a thing to happen before the end of the world.

But Jesus can imagine a world without the temple, and he knows it's going to happen, and he doesn't seem bothered by it, because the temple is becoming obsolete. This is one of the things the context of holy week reminds us of. The temple becomes obsolete with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In Old Testament worship, the temple served two basic functions. One, it was the place where God dwelt among his people. In this respect, the temple began to become obsolete with the incarnation and birth of Jesus. God now dwelt among his people in bodily form—the body of Jesus (John 1:14). This is much closer to his people than the temple ever was.

The second function was that it was the place of sacrifice. In this respect the temple became completely obsolete when Jesus offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. There was no longer any need for bulls and goats and birds or any such thing to be sacrificed.

Therefore, the temple became obsolete, because its functions were all fulfilled in the body of Jesus. So we see that the real purpose of the temple was to look forward to Jesus. It was a prophetic picture of Jesus Christ. Once the real temple came—once Jesus came—the picture was no longer necessary.

Furthermore, with Jesus' resurrection, the Holy Spirit is given to his believing saints (John 20:22), so God dwells intimately with his people through the Holy Spirit. For this reason the Church is called both the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 5:29-32) and the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:4-5). It's not the church building that is the temple, but the people. You and me and all God's saints around the world are living stones, which God is building into a spiritual house. Jesus is the true temple of God, and his Church, in a mystical way, since it is his body, is also that same temple.

So Jesus could imagine a world without the old temple, because it was becoming obsolete, but the disciples couldn't, so they associated the destruction of the temple with the end of the world. But, in a way, they were sort of right, because the end times are not some distant time off in the future. We are living in the end times right now. We have been since the death and resurrection of Jesus, for that was the establishment of his kingdom. So as Jesus tells his disciples the signs of the end, we can see that some of these things were fulfilled within their lifetime, but some of it is off in the future.

So we'll consider the signs Jesus gives, but first Jesus has a warning: **"See that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them."** (21:8). Before Jesus even tells us what to look for, he first tells us what to look out for. There will be false christs and false teachers. We are not to believe them. Believers should actually be skeptics. A believer of the truth is an unbeliever of everything false. It's okay—even necessary—to be skeptical of many things.

Some will claim to be Jesus himself. We should not believe them. So far, everyone who has made this claim has been wrong. There will probably be more, and they will also be wrong.

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When Jesus does return, there will be angels and trumpets. Everyone will see him for who he is. He won't have to convince anyone of his identity. So whenever someone claims to be the Christ, we automatically know he is wrong.

Others will claim to know the time. People are constantly trying to figure this out. I actually know people who have done this. So far, they have all been wrong, and they will continue to be wrong, because no one knows the time (Matt. 24:36). As soon as someone claims to know the time, that is our sign that he is a false prophet. We should not listen to them regarding the end times. In fact, we should not listen to them regarding anything. There are enough faithful teachers of God's Word in the world, we don't have to try to sort through what might be true from someone who has already proven himself to be a false prophet.

This is Jesus' warning: **"See that you are not led astray."** There will be false teachers. Be careful. Know the Scriptures. Know what Jesus says. Know what his apostles say. Beware of anyone who teaches contrary. Beware of anyone who goes beyond what they say. Beware of anyone who claims to have broken some code. Before Jesus gives us the signs, he gives us the warning: **"See that you are not led astray."**

There are three basic events that Jesus goes on to describe. The first event is persecution. This comes before the destruction of the temple and before the wars and natural disasters (21:12). The persecution Jesus speaks of here seems to be directed primarily at the twelve apostles, though we still see persecution going on in the world today. He tells the apostles that they will be delivered up to synagogues and prisons, and they will be brought before kings and governors (21:12). So there's a silver lining here. This would be their opportunity to testify before kings and governors. This part especially applies to the apostles, because they were eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Jesus isn't talking about sharing your personal testimony. He's talking about legal testimony. The apostles would testify in the royal courts that Jesus rose from the dead. The silver lining of their persecution is that they could testify of Jesus' resurrection in open court. And Jesus promised that they need not worry, nor even think, about what to say in the courtroom, because Jesus would give them the words to speak, and no one would be able to contradict them.

The saddest part of the persecution, though, is that they would **"be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends"** (21:16). This persecution has continued throughout the entire history of the Church. Some would even be put to death. But Jesus makes the most glorious promise: **"Not a hair of your head shall perish"** (21:18). Even if they kill you because of your faith in Christ, **"Not a hair of your head shall perish."** This is because of the resurrection of the dead. For the saints of God in Christ Jesus, death is merely sleep. No one can take anything from one of God's elect that he will not receive back in the resurrection of the dead.

The second event Jesus describes is the destruction of Jerusalem. This gets at the disciples' initial question about the temple. Jesus calls these the **"days of vengeance"** (21:22), so this seems to be God's judgment against the city for rejecting the Christ.

Jesus warns his disciples that when Jerusalem is surrounded by armies, they should flee. This is the opposite of what people usually did when armies came against their city. Cities were like fortresses. If you stayed in the open country, the foreign army would do bad things to you. So everyone would rush into the city and prepare for the siege. But Jesus says to do the opposite. If

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you're in Jerusalem, get out. If you're in the open country, don't go back to the city. Flee to the mountains. It wasn't just the temple that would be destroyed, but the entire city.

Jesus' prophecy came to pass in 70 AD, less than forty years later, when the armies of Rome came to squelch a rebellion. This was only six years after the temple renovation was completed. It was a complete and brutal destruction.

And the third event Jesus describes is his own return. This occurs after the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (21:24).

The word "Gentiles" can also be translated "nations," and that captures the purpose of this time a little better. It's a time of repentance for the entire world, where God calls people of all nations to believe in Jesus and be saved, for God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). This is the time we are living in now. No one knows how long this time will be, but it will be exactly as long as God intends. It's a time of harvest as God's Word is going out to all the world to call all people to faith in Christ.

When this time of the Gentiles is completed, there will be signs in the sky and on the earth and in the sea. The signs will be so terrifying that people faint with fear. Then we "**will see the Son of Man**"—that's Jesus—"**coming in a cloud with power and great glory**" (21:27).

For some this will be the most terrifying sight of all, because it will mean great judgment. But for Jesus' disciples, it means redemption. So Jesus says, "**When these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**"

When it seems that it cannot get any worse, when the world is falling apart, when others are fainting with fear, you stand up tall and raise your heads, "**because your redemption is drawing near.**"

This is also called "the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). Christ has already redeemed us from sin by his death and resurrection. But we still suffer the effects of sin. We experience evil in our own bodies. We see it in the world around us every day. This world is still a messed up place, and it will be for as long as it exists. That is why we are waiting for the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the redemption of our bodies, the new creation, and the everlasting life Christ has promised there.

We are living in the last days. How close are we to the very end? No one knows. How bad will it get? Again, no one knows. Is today about as bad as evil is allowed to get? Maybe. Maybe not. We don't have to look hard to find enough evil and suffering in the world. We don't have to look hard to find signs of the end. Maybe this present evil is twenty percent as bad as it will get. Maybe it's ninety-eight percent. It may be today that Christ redeems us from the curse. It may be another thousand years. We may not have even begun to realize what we must suffer for his Name. But this we know: It is worth it. Whatever it may be, it is worth it, because he is coming. "**Straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**" Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, "**Surely I am coming soon.**" Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)