

18 November 2007
Pentecost 25

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Confidence to Face the Future”

Text: Luke 21:5-28; Malachi 4:1-6; 2 Thess 3:1-13

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

The end of the church year turns the church’s attention to the end of time, the end of the world, the end of life here as we know it. Just like us, the world is slowing down and wearing out; just like us, its days are numbered. *The day is coming*, the prophet Malachi reminded us today. Indeed it is. Each day that goes by drawing us one day closer to the end.

But we have a problem talking about all this, because the end of the world has – in our day and age – become cliché, and once something becomes cliché it is very difficult to get people to take it seriously again. And so any talk of the end of the world today conjures up images of wackos in armed compounds; or the gullible in white robes on mountain tops; or of wild-eyed zealots carrying signs that say “the end is near”; or of slick TV evangelists trying to scare people into believing in Christ. Is it any wonder, then, that people ignore this message, acting like the child who closes her eyes and thinks that because she cannot see the danger, the danger is no longer there! Or that many churches choose to use these weeks to talk about stewardship instead of the end times.

But that is sad, and such evasion has impoverished the church. Because focusing on the end times actually does not so much teach us about the end, but teaches us how to live each and every moment of our lives. And so this is not an irrelevant topic, or one for only future generations to worry about. It is for us. And it is good for us. And properly taught, can be a *comforting* teaching for us.

Now I know that sounds funny, because when we look forward to the end, we don’t get a very comforting picture, but a frightening one! The words that we heard today from Malachi and Jesus are startling – words of destruction, of political upheavals and armies, of natural catastrophes, of persecutions, of distress and foreboding. It is

a picture of a world coming undone, a world seemingly overwhelmed with evil, a world dying. And who wants to spend much time thinking about that? And when we do, we wonder what will happen to us? Will we be caught in this upheaval? When is it going to happen? And where? And how? And minds filled with such anxiety are the devil's playground, who uses such fear and uncertainty to draw our hearts and minds away from God and away from Christ, and to instead place our trust and hope in things here and now, that seem much more stable, much more reliable, much more knowable. And we fall for it. But the reality is that these false gods will always let us down, and leave us hopeless - not hopeful.

So we need to think about and talk about the end, to teach us how to live now. And the Church does this the only way she knows how - *we walk into the future by walking backward*. We look forward by looking back. We see what lies ahead by looking to the past. And when we do so our fears are taken away, **because we see that the One who is coming is the One who has already come**. We see that the battle has already been won and is not in doubt. We see that the end times are not just a future phenomena, but that all these things were set in motion with the crucifixion of the Son of God.

For the pivotal point in the history of the world is not what is going to happen in the future, with armies, battles, wars, disasters, and all that - but what happened on the cross. That is the day that changed everything. That is the day when the sin of the world and the wrath of God against that sin was atoned for by the Son of God. That is the day when Satan was routed and his kingdom plundered. And when Jesus rose from the grave, that is the day when death was stripped of its power, and we see that the death of this world and our own deaths are not the end - by the beginning of a new life. A new life free from the oppressions and fears of this world. Free from the tyranny and dominion of the evil one. Free from captivity to sin. That we may live already here and now, in confidence and peace, knowing that whatever the future may bring, we are safe and secure in Christ Jesus. In His victory. In His life.

And so we Christians face the future by looking back to the cross, and back to when the cross was applied to us individually and personally in Holy Baptism. There, the Son of God who died for the sin of the world became the Son of God who died **for me**. There He joined me to His own death and resurrection, so that when I die - however, whenever - I know that life awaits. There Jesus said to you and me: you belong to Me. You do not belong anymore to yourself, or the world, or sin, or Satan. I have destroyed those enemies in this, My flood. You belong to Me. You are My

treasured possession. And I will keep you safe in My forgiveness and life, until I take you home. **And so with such a promise, do we need fear the future? Or the end?**

But that is not all, for even as we face the future by looking *back* **to** the cross, we can then also face the future by looking *forward* **through** the cross, to how the cross is still being applied to us today, personally and individually, in Holy Communion. For here our crucified and resurrected Saviour joins Himself to us as we eat His body and drink his blood, that the life which no worldly or *other-worldly* army could defeat, be ours. That through the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith, the things that weigh us down and rob us of life be trampled under His victorious feet. That here we get a glimpse of our future – that now this Table set before us in the presence of our enemies, will in the end be the Table of the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end. **And with such a promise, do we need fear the future? Or the end?**

And so by looking forward by looking back, the Church is a bit like a fallout shelter in the midst of the storms of this life, and of the things of the end. For while the world and everything around us is falling apart, here is that which cannot fall apart. Here is the firm foundation that we need. Here is life in the midst of death, peace in the midst of fear, and certainty in the midst of uncertainty. Here, let the waves of persecutions and wars, disasters and disease, beat upon the doors of our hearts and faith. They cannot harm those whose faith is being guarded by the One who took on those foes, and won. By the One who has *promised* us that where He is, there we will be also. (John 14:3)

And *the Lord is faithful*, St. Paul reminds us. *He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.* And so we need not fear, we need not hide, we need not try to escape the things of this world. But knowing that our future is secure, we live and work now in confidence – living our lives in repentance and faith, serving our neighbor in love, and *not growing weary in doing good.* Because for Christians, the future is now. The prophets dreadful “day of the Lord” has been transfigured for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus into the *joyful* Lord’s Day, where dying in repentance we are raised to life in absolution; where hungering and thirsting for righteousness we are given the food and drink of immortality; and where burdened by the things of this world, we are set free to live. **And with such realities, do we need fear the future? Or the end?**

So do not let the world and its clichés co-opt our Lord’s teachings on the end of the

world. Do not let the fears and falsehoods of some become the fearful faith of the many. Instead, look to the future with your eyes on the cross, so that when others ask us (as the disciples asked Jesus): "*when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?*" We give the answer Jesus gave. The answer of - and from - the cross. When? "*It is finished!*" (John 19:30)

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.