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Pentecost 24

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Divine Endurance”

Text: Hebrews 10:11-25 (Mark 13:1-13; Daniel 12:1-3)

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

Jesus tells us today about the world coming to an end. And it's quite a horrifying picture. The Temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed, with **“not one stone left upon another.”** Political upheavals and natural catastrophes will mark this period. Christians will be persecuted by members of their own families and hated by non-Christians. We heard from Daniel that it will be a time of trouble **“such as never has been”** before. If you're like me, you hear these things and hope you're not alive when this all takes place.

Well, I have bad news for you. Even though some will try to interpret these signs and determine how close we are to the end, we have here in these words not a glimpse of a certain time and place in the future, but a picture of the church *of all time*. For persecution, hatred, trials, and troubles is the lot of the church in an evil and sin-filled world. There never has been a “golden age” of the church and there never will be. The church on earth is ever and always the church militant. The church *of the cross under the cross*.

But today I also have some good news for you. Actually two bits of good news. First Jesus tells us that exactly in this period of trouble and mass confusion, the Holy Spirit will cause the Gospel to be preached everywhere. And He's actually going to use the troubles to do so. What Satan intends for evil, God will use for good. And second, Jesus also concludes with the promise that **the one who endures to the end will be saved**. The question is: *how* do we endure to the end, in the midst of all this trouble? And *can* we even?

As we look at the church and the world, it is easy to have a crisis of confidence. Things aren't very good and seem only to be getting worse. Budget shortfalls, lack of growth, theological challenges, and social decay all create uncertainty and discouragement. Some churches give in to the cultural pressures, while others become paralyzed in fear. In either case, the church is no longer salt and light in the world. Instead of boldly confronting the culture with the Gospel, we peek out a hole in the drapes at the world and its troubles, shake our heads, and pray: *Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly.*

We are certainly not the first to do this. The book of Hebrews - from which our second reading came - was written as a letter of encouragement to a spiritually discouraged church. It is a letter that teaches us how to endure to the end. It is a letter that reminds us that in the midst of this world of trouble and struggle, *we have unlimited supernatural resources at hand*. It tells us that we are sitting on a gold mine. For we are not alone in this world - we have Christ Jesus! He is not somewhere up in heaven, just sitting around and planning on coming for us sometime in the future - He is here for us *now*. Here with all His power, forgiveness, victory, and life. Here to help and strengthen us in our struggles, to take us to His Father, that we endure to the end. On our own, we would never make it. But with Him and in Him, we not only can, we *will*.

And so if you are feeling a bit weak and vulnerable, a bit discouraged and frightened, a bit puzzled and overwhelmed, repent, for you've been relying on yourself. Repent and receive the life and forgiveness of Jesus, your Saviour; the life and forgiveness that is greater than any power in this world; the life and forgiveness that is here for you.

For so the author to the Hebrews wrote: ***“we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus.”*** You see, in the Old Testament, that access - access to God - was restricted; *severely* restricted. Only the priests could enter the holy places in the Temple, and only the *High Priest* was able to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. And the same holds true now also in the time of the New Testament. By right, only one person has the privilege of unrestricted and open access to God the Father, and that person is Jesus. But *now*, the author to the Hebrews tells us, through His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus has extended His own right of access to you! You now ***have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus*** - to come before your Father in heaven with any and every need, knowing that He will treat you as no stranger or intruder, but as His own dear son. And so you come to Him in worship, and you come to His Table, and Jesus' body and blood puts you physically in touch with God. In touch with the life, forgiveness, and power that you need.

But even though you have such access to God our Father, still you might not come on your own - for who are you to come to God? And so the author continues: ***“and since we have a great high priest over the house of God.”*** Again, in the Old Testament, the priests led the worship of God's people. Under God's direction, they arranged the meeting between God and His people in the Temple. They were the mediators, to bring the people into the gracious presence of God. Well so too now, in the time of the New Testament, you have this divine assistance - for now *Jesus is your great high priest*. By His death and resurrection He has arranged your meeting with God in the Divine Service, and leads us in our worship here. In His flesh and

blood, He brings the grace of God to us and takes us to into the gracious presence of God, that we hear and receive the Word and gifts of God, His Word and gifts of forgiveness and life.

But even still, we have a problem. For even though we have open access to God our Father and Jesus takes us into His presence, still our conscience condemns and convicts us. You know your sin, you know your failure, you know your unworthiness. You are not as you should be, and your guilty conscience turns and distorts everything He says into disapproval. And so the author goes on again to remind us: ***“our hearts have been sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”*** Or in other words, you have been baptized! Unlike the priests in the Old Testament, whose *bodies* were cleansed and sanctified for admission to God’s presence, your *heart* has also been made clean and holy by Jesus. And so you are pure and blameless before Him - physically, mentally, and spiritually. Jesus has taken all your impurity and hung it on the cross with Himself, so it is no longer on you. You, now, have been given the new life and pure heart of His resurrection, and as Jesus said: *“Blessed are the pure in heart - why? - for they shall see God.”* (Matt 5:8)

All of that is what makes the Divine Service so awesome, in the true sense of the Word. What is happening here is life-changing. It is the continuing work of Jesus for us, giving us all we need, and keeping us so that we endure to the end. But not *just* endure, or *merely* endure, but begin living our eternal life even now. And so the author to the Hebrews spells out what this service of Jesus - His service to us - means for us in our lives. First, he tells us, because of Jesus, we ***“hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”*** It is not that we don’t waver because we are so strong, but because Jesus is so faithful. The result being that in these last days, we are neither dreamily and unrealistically optimistic, nor downcast and pessimistic, but confident in the promises of Christ. Our future as Christians is guaranteed by Him, and worked in us now by His Word and Spirit. And so this we confess to the world.

And then second, the author also says that, because of Jesus, we ***“consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”*** In these last days of trouble and struggle, we need each other to bring out the best in each other; to stir each other up; to be blessings to one another. This too comes from our Saviour as He stirs you here with His Word and good work; as He makes you His saints and gives you a share in His glory; as He makes you citizens of heaven. With all of this given to you, you now live as who you are - children of God in a world of sin and death and workers of good in a world of selfishness as Christ lives in us and we in Him.

And finally, because of Jesus, we do ***“not neglect to meet together . . . but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*** We

meet together here because we need to be here, here in the Divine Service. You need to be here, and we need you here. For to be a Christian is never just an individual, me and Jesus, thing - but a corporate thing, a body of Christ reality, a gift. A gift that in these last days of sore distress, you have a place to stand, and stand not alone. A gift to stand with your fellow sinners made saints, your fellow struggling pilgrims, your brothers and sisters in Christ. Under attack, it is easy to forget who you are. Here, the Word of God comes to you through Word, through Sacrament, and through our common confession, to remind you, establish you, encourage you, and root you in the truth. The truth of Christ. The truth of His forgiveness and life. **And all the more do you** need this, **as you see the Day drawing near.**

It won't be easy. If it were, you wouldn't need faith, and you wouldn't need Christ. But having Christ, you have a very powerful enemy in satan, who rages against you and hates you with a perfect hatred. And so we should not expect it to be easy. But in the midst of it all, you have a refuge. A place of shelter from the storms. A Temple not of stones that can be knocked down, but of flesh and bone that can never die. A Saviour who knows your weakness and so is here in strength. To give you hope, to give you confidence, to give you Himself. And in Him you will not just endure to the end, but beyond that - to life everlasting.

How can you be sure? **He who promised is faithful.** He who promised is the One who rose from the dead. He who promised is Christ our Lord. Who lives and reigns for you, that you may live and reign with Him, forever.

He is the answer. The only answer. Who will never lead you astray.
He is the answer. The only answer. Who will never let you down.
He is the answer. The only answer. That makes the devil flee.
He is the answer. The only answer. Christ, the Lord.

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.

(Thanks to Rev. Dr. David Scaer and Rev. Dr. John Kleinig, from whom I liberally borrowed much for this sermon!)