

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

It's the end of the church year, and in our Gospel Jesus nears the climax of His time among us. This preaching takes place during what we call Holy Week, and in it He turns the disciples' minds and ours on eschatology — the last things.

Whatever else we might say about it, talk of the end times often fills us with foreboding at what lies ahead, even though we are numbered among those who "*fear [the LORD's] name*"! When the day finally arrives and the trumpet sounds (1 Cor. 15:52), we shall surely "*go out leaping like calves from the stall,*" but before that, Jesus tells us there will be "*wars and tumults*"; there will be "*Nation [rising up] against nation, and kingdom against kingdom*"; there will be "*earthquakes, and ... famines and pestilences*"; we will experience "*terrors,*" capture, persecution, imprisonment, trials "*before kings and governors*" because we confess the name of Jesus; we will be betrayed by family and relatives and friends; we will be hated, again because of Jesus; and we could die for confessing His name. It's no wonder that we feel uncomfortable pondering such times; Jesus calls them "*days of vengeance.*"

Some of the predicted signs have happened; when you see them, Jesus says, "*the end will not be at once.*" But some still loom in the future, and these signs signal that the end is near. These signs move us to "*straighten up and raise [our] heads,*" not duck and cover. We will lift up our heads to welcome "*the Lord of hosts,*" Jesus, "*the King of glory*" (Ps. 24:10), coming "again in glory to judge both the living and the dead" (Nicene Creed). We will straighten up "*because [our] redemption is drawing near,*" the day of the resurrection of all flesh, for then we "*will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*"

Jesus promises it here; the angels echoed the promise at Jesus' ascension, when "*he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*" (Acts 1:9). Those angels told the apostles: "*This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*" (Acts 1:11) — on the clouds, this time with "*power and great glory,*" this time, flanked by the angels from heaven, and not only will "*the dead in Christ ... rise first,*" but also "*we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*" (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

When that great and glorious day shall be, we do not know. Indeed, Jesus warns us about those false Christs who speak "*in [His] name,*" who claim that they are the great "*I AM,*" or who say they know the exact day of His return and preach "*The time is at hand!*" Jesus says, "*Do not go after them.*" But that doesn't mean that we can't recognize the signs. And surely we must admit that wars and tumults in the world, earthquakes, famines, and pandemics have been commonplace, and Christians have been experiencing them throughout the

centuries, even unto death. Peter, who was himself martyred, admits: *“the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world”* (1 Pet. 5:9). So it was then; so it is still today.

But Peter encourages us not to lose heart. Rightly so, because the victory has been won — Christ already won the victory. And in fact, it seems to me that there is a bit of that victory hiding behind the scenes in this text, after all, what was it that motivated Jesus to tell the disciples about the end times? It was their fascination with the temple, that magnificent building that Herod had built. Jesus told them that this imposing structure would be torn down, and *“there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”* That’s when they asked, *“when will these things be”*?

You might think it began in the year of our Lord AD 70. That’s when the temple was destroyed by the Romans as they put down another Jewish insurrection. But was the destruction of the physical temple on Mount Zion really the beginning of the end? No, that began some 40 years earlier, for the destruction of the true temple was something hidden in Jesus Himself.

Remember, the temple, and the tabernacle before it, was the dwelling place of God, but in Jesus’ day, God no longer came down from heaven to sit on the mercy seat of God. Since the Babylonian Captivity of Israel, the Ark was lost, the glory of God departed (Ezek. 10:18). The Ark was not kept behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies in Herod’s temple. Understandable, since the true dwelling place of God had moved to the person of Jesus, for *“the Word,” “the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth,” “became flesh and dwelt among us”* (John 1:14). In the Son the glory of God came down from heaven to dwell with man.

Indeed, remember, Jesus had previously talked about *“the temple of his body”* (John 2:21). In John 2, when Jesus had just finished cleansing the temple of the money changers and merchants, the Jews asked Him for confirming signs that He had the authority to do this — the Jews were always asking for confirming signs. Jesus said to them, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”* (John 2:19). We know that He wasn’t talking about the physical temple, but the Jews didn’t understand that — nor did the disciples at first. Then at His trial, Jesus was falsely accused of claiming that He Himself could destroy the temple and raise it back up (Matt. 26:61). Again, they were thinking of the physical temple, but Jesus never said that He would destroy the temple. And then as He hung from the cross, He was mocked with this same claim, saying *“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”* (Matt. 27:40).

Obviously, they didn’t get it, even as the perfect lamb of God was being sacrificed there before them, but Herod’s temple, the dwelling place of God, the place

of sacrifice, was but a type of the real temple, Jesus Himself. And Jesus, by His death, became the true mercy seat of God. The disciples finally got it. *“When therefore [Jesus] was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken”* (John 2:22).

Truly, that stone structure of the temple would be torn down — it happened, and it has never been (and I believe never again will be) rebuilt. For actually the true temple was destroyed 40 years earlier. He was killed on the cross; on the other hand, that temple has been rebuilt. It was rebuilt in three days as Jesus foretold ... *“He is not here, but has risen”* (Luke 24:6). It was rebuilt by Jesus Himself; it was rebuilt on Jesus Himself, *“a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious”* (1 Pet. 2:4). The temple is built on *“the stone that the builders rejected,”* but which *“has become the cornerstone”* (1 Pet. 2:7). It’s a house that continues to be built on Jesus, on the testimony of the apostles and prophets, and on faith. *“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame”* (1 Pet. 2:6).

Yes, we’re talking about the church here, built on Christ the cornerstone, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. We are part of this dwelling place of God, *“living stones”* (1 Pet. 2:5) *“being joined together”* in Christ, as St. Paul says, and we are growing *“into a holy temple in the Lord”* (Eph. 2:21).

Moreover, the time of the church, ushered in with these momentous events spoken of by Christ, marked in part by the destruction of Herod’s temple, but begun in Christ, has always been the era of the last days. Oh, yes, there will be the final consummation of all things when the Son of Man will return in power and great glory, but we’re living the end times now.

So what does Jesus say to us now? How shall we live in these “gray and latter days” (LSB834:4)? He says endure. It’s going to be tough ... lawlessness, tribulation, betrayal, hatred, death. *“By your endurance you will gain your lives.”* He says beware lest we be led astray by false Christs. He says be watchful as we await the coming of the Lord. Stay awake; remain faithful. He says be about the tasks that He has given you: proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom to the whole world. Don’t lose heart. Abide in Jesus’ Word and Sacraments. And be ready with eyes lifted up to the hills, trusting in the one who is Your help: Jesus Christ, Your Lord. In these tough times, He will keep you; He will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life — *“not a hair of your head will perish”*; He will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever more. God grant it for the sake of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.