

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

When it comes to preaching occasional sermons — that is, sermons for a particular occasion — funerals are the best. To be sure, the occasion is not the best; the survivors are living in the shadowy times of death; they are grieving. But surviving Christians do *“not grieve as others do who have no hope”* (1 Thess. 4:13), as St. Paul reminds us all. We have hope, I was reminded of as I was making calls this week. We hope in resurrection. For *“we believe that Jesus died and rose again,”* and so we believe that *“through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”* We believe that *“the dead in Christ will rise”* from their slumber (1 Thess. 4:14, 16). And this is what we preach to the grieving ... that they may have hope concerning their loved ones and concerning their own salvation. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

When it comes to preaching sermons about the end times, on the other hand, I don't think we want to say that “they're the best.” From this preacher's point of view anyway, they're not better than Christmas or Easter or Pentecost sermons, those great festivals of the Church. After all, in the words of Daniel, in those final days, we're going to experience another kind of darkness — *“a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.”* In our Gospel, Jesus talked about being delivered *“over to councils, and ... [being] beaten in synagogues, and ... stand[ing] before governors and kings ... to bear witness [to Jesus] before them.”* Jesus talked about *“brother [delivering] brother over to death, and the father his child, and children [their] parents ....”* Jesus talked about being *“hated by all for my name's sake”* — because you dare confess Jesus as Lord.

It sounds frightening, and it is. It could be dangerous, even deadly, Jesus says. That's worthy of grief, too. But like now when we're dealing with death, also when we are thinking on the end times, we do not grieve as those do who have no hope. We can look with confidence at the coming of the end; we can look with hope at Jesus' return in glory, for again, our hope is in resurrection, Christ's and then ours, as St. Paul preached to the Corinthians: *“Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep ... in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ”* (1 Cor. 15:20, 22-23).

It's what we confess when we confess in the Apostles' Creed “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” We do it in the Nicene Creed, too, but here I want to quote Luther's explanation from the Catechism: “On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ” (Creed, Third Article). All the dead will be raised up — sheep and goats, believers and unbelievers — but only believers, only the sheep will be given eternal life.

That's just how Daniel described it in our Old Testament reading: On that day, *“many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”*

Jesus explained one of His kingdom parables in a similar way: *“Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Matt. 13:40-42).

And even as Daniel described those who rise to everlasting life: *“those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever”*; so Jesus described them: *“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”* And Jesus concludes: *“He who has ears, let him hear”* (Matt. 13:43).

Yes, listen up, O saints of the Lord. Our hope is in Jesus Christ, who offered up a *“single sacrifice for sins.”* Our hope is in Jesus Christ who by His righteous life and by His all sufficient death *“has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”* Our hope is in Jesus Christ who has opened the way for us through the curtain and into the holy places by His blood. Our hope is in Jesus Christ who died but who lives and reigns, our Lord and our God. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

But even we modern disciples who hope in Christ want to know — like Jesus' first disciples did: *“when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”* Those who listened attentively at the reading of the Gospel probably noticed ... Jesus didn't answer the “when” question right away. It was the disciples' first question, but Jesus took up the second question first.

The first big sign will be the destruction of the temple. *“There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”* It turns out that this sign has already been accomplished! And the temple will not be rebuilt, all this modern interest notwithstanding by certain Jews and Evangelical Christians about finding a *“red heifer without defect”* to be sacrificed (Num. 19:2) that supposedly will signal Christ's imminent return and the rebuilding of the temple. And what would the rebuilding of the temple mean? Sacrifice again! That is so antichristian! Christ has been sacrificed, an atonement for the sins of the world; no more sacrifices are needed. We just heard it: *“Where there is forgiveness of [sins and our lawless deeds], there is no longer any offering for sin.”*

But God has ensured that the temple won't be rebuilt. He allowed the Muslims to build a mosque on the temple mount with the Dome of the Rock at its center. It is considered one of the most sacred sites in Islam. It won't be torn down without a

religious war pitting the billions of Muslims against those seeking to destroy their holy site.

So the temple has been destroyed as foretold. The gospel has surely been “*proclaimed to all nations.*” And many other signs are being fulfilled constantly: false christs, wars and rumors of wars, nations rising up against nations, persecutions, earthquakes, famines, etc. Has the world ever seen such decadence as we have it today? Why one might think — and rightly so: the signs are right; the end is imminent! So have thought faithful Christians throughout the centuries. And so might it be yet today.

Paying attention to the signs only helps Christians heed Jesus’ warning: “*be on your guard.*” And a bit later: “*Be on guard, keep awake*” (Mark 13:33). And again: “*stay awake*” (Mark 13:35). For Jesus finally gets to the disciples’ first question: “*when will these things be*”? And His answer to that is “*no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*” (Mark 13:35). Don’t be fooled by those who claim that they have figured it out — if the Son didn’t know, they can’t either, and history has proven it: they’ve always been wrong! No, Jesus is definitive: “*you do not know when the time will come*” (Mark 13:33). That helps Christians in their weakness, too, and that’s Jesus point: “*you do not know ...*”; “*therefore, stay awake*” (Mark 13:35).

Yes, stay awake! Hope in Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Cling to your baptism whereby your hearts were “*sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and [your] bodies washed with pure water.*” Hold fast to the confession you made then and again at your confirmation. Be faithful hearers of God’s word and doers of it in “*love and good works.*” Eat and drink your salvation in the Holy Supper and be built up in faith and love. Congregate at church and be encouraged by each other to be on guard, to stay awake, to “*endure[] to the end*” that you might “*be saved.*”

Then you can truly say as we just sang: “O Jesus Christ, do not delay, But hasten our salvation; We often tremble on our way In fear and tribulation. O hear and grant our fervent plea; Come, mighty judge, and make us free From death and ev’ry evil” (LSB508:7).

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