

The 3rd-Last Sunday of the Church Year  
November 9, 2008

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University Lutheran Chapel  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

### INSCRIBED ON HIS PALMS

Isaiah 49:12-17; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 24:15-28

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We hear our Lord in the Gospel lesson this morning speaking to His disciples about the last days. And some of what He says about those days does not sound very good to us. He speaks about people fleeing to the mountains, about people abandoning even their clothing in their haste to escape, about the danger to those who are weak, such as the pregnant woman. For He warns: “then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved.”

But Jesus gives us a sign to watch for, so that we will know when these last days are upon us. He says to watch for “the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place.” And what is this “abomination of desolation?” To understand we must turn to Daniel and see just what he was speaking about. From Daniel 11 where the prophet is speaking about a great invasion that would take place in Israel: “and they shall defile the sanctuary fortress; then they shall take away the daily sacrifices, and place there the abomination of desolation.” Three things are mentioned in this action. First, a defilement of the sanctuary fortress will take place. What is the sanctuary fortress? It is the Temple, the holy fortress of God. Second, the daily sacrifices will be taken away. The chief function of the temple was that of being the place of sacrifice. Daily sacrifices were offered up to God in that place for the forgiveness of sins and for the cleansing of the people. Third, within the temple, the invaders would place the abomination of desolation. Now an abomination is something that is abhorrent to God. Now if something that God abhors is done in the holy Temple, it desecrates the place, it causes the place to be desolate because God no longer finds the place acceptable and holy. Part of this was fulfilled already by the time of Christ. For about two centuries earlier the temple had been desecrated by the king Antiochus Epiphanes who had forbid the keeping of the Sabbath and had set up an altar to Zeus within the Temple. There he commanded that swine be sacrificed – an abomination to the Lord. But this was not the end of the Temple and the daily round of sacrifices eventually resumed. (See I Maccabees 1:47)

Now you might be wondering what all of this means and why it is important to understand exactly what Daniel and Christ were referring to. If so, ask yourself this: Is there a Temple standing in Jerusalem today? And are the daily round of Old Testament sacrifices still going on? Is God’s holy presence still attached to that specific spot? The answers to all of these questions are “no.” An ancient Jewish historian named Josephus tells us the reason. The Romans, under the emperor Vespasian, while putting down a Jewish revolt destroyed the temple entirely, burning it to the ground. In the process, the Roman commander Titus entered the Holy of Holies, desecrating the place that no one, especially a Gentile heathen, was allowed to enter. And thus the abomination of desolation was completed.

And so to this day there is no Temple, no round of sacrifices, no Holy of Holies. Some Israelites hope that one day the Temple will be rebuilt and these things will resume. And so they are very careful about people walking on the temple mount for fear that someone might walk in the place where the Holy of Holies once was and desecrate it. But do they not remember that the desecration has already taken place? Do they not see that the place continues to be desecrated to this day by the Islamic mosque which now stands where the Temple once was? God has forsaken it. The abomination has been done. And so ever since 70 AD when the temple, having been repeatedly desecrated, was finally destroyed we have been in the last times.

But there was a greater desolation of the temple than this. It is the abominable desolation done to the greater Temple of Christ's body, when He was rejected by His own people, handed over to the Romans, driven out of the Holy City bearing His cross, and hung up on it to die. And so really since the days of Christ's death and resurrection, we have been in the last times.

The abomination of desolation has taken place both in the Jewish Temple and in the Temple of Christ's Flesh. The sign is fulfilled. And what this means for us is that we are now living in the time of the great tribulation. The days Jesus was warning the church about have come.

And so we also see increased tribulation among Christians in the world. First we were persecuted by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, then by the Roman Emperors, then by those whom the church tried to convert, eventually by the Soviet Union, now in the Sudan and other places, and even to a very mild degree by our own government. Persecution is part of the tribulation Christ warns about.

But the real tribulation for the church is not so much persecution by other people as persecution from the devil. Paul explains in Ephesians 6: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." The tribulation of the Church is mainly a spiritual tribulation. And so greater damage is caused by the devil than by a Caesar. More harm is done by a heretic than a persecutor. And so Jesus, warning of tribulation, speaks not about worldly rulers, but about false prophets. "For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect." And we can see these false prophets all around working against Christ from within the Holy Church. We can see the effects of this clearly in the divisions that have sprung up between Christians – divisions over the doctrine of the church, over who Christ is and what He has done, and over what it means to be a Christian. We can see it clearly in the way the church's liturgy and worship life has disintegrated and become in some places little more than entertainment. And we can see it in the people who are led astray and grow to hold a false confession of faith. And these things are nothing new to our time, but have been going on since the time of the apostles. Then the battles were against heretics with names like Marcion and Arius today they are against the host of false teachers that claim for themselves the title prophet or apostle or just Christian, but seek to elevate their own personal beliefs and convictions above the true and apostolic faith.

But the tribulation of the Church does not only happen at the corporate level, it is also experienced in the lives of Christ's holy people as they strive to remain faithful to Him. The devil, the world, false prophets, and even our own flesh fight against us daily, seeking to lead us to despair, seeking to lead us away from Christ and the hard road of faith laid before us.

And in times of tribulation, whether it occurs in the church itself, or in our own hearts and lives, we often begin to lose hope. We plead to God “why don’t you help us and save us from these problems?” And we begin to question the promises that God has made. Is He really working things out for our good? Is He hearing our prayers? Is He aware of our anguish? Does He care at all? Is He really coming back to bring us into heaven? Or has He forgotten about us?

The people in the early Church dealt with these same issues. For they lived their lives in the expectation that Jesus would return in their own lifetimes. They had seen the signs fulfilled. They knew there would be a short time of tribulation. But they also knew Christ promised to return quickly. When Jesus didn’t come back, and Christians who had expected to see His return were dying of old age, many began to lose heart and some forsook the faith altogether, thinking that Jesus had forgotten about them, or perhaps that He hadn’t really been the Son of God after all. This struggle impelled Paul to write the words of our Epistle today which speak about the Christians who have died and encourage the living to wait patiently for the Lord’s return. And Paul speaks with confidence that, “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.” Just as our Lord has told us today: “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes in the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.”

These things are promises from God. Jesus will return in triumph and put an end to all of our tribulations. As Paul tells us this morning, He is coming to bring us with Him into heaven, the place where, we heard in the Epistle last week, God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Paul says that we are to find hope in these promises and that we are to “comfort one another with these words.”

But how can these words comfort us when it feels to us that God has forgotten? What about when we feel like Zion in the Old Testament lesson who cries out: “The Lord has afflicted me, and my Lord has forsaken me.” We can find comfort because we know that God will never forget us. As He says through Isaiah: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on a son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you.” But if that is not enough, there is something else, something that constantly reminds Him of us. He says: “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands.” Christ will never leave us or forsake us or forget us because we are inscribed on the palms of his hands. There He always sees the nail wounds that He received to save us. There is the reminder of all the people who He died to save. There He sees each of us, inscribed on the palms of His hands. And these scars cannot be forgotten.

And so we know that God will never forget us. And we know with confidence that no matter how hard our tribulations may be, and no matter how much we may feel forsaken, and no matter how hopeless the situation seems, we have God’s attention and His help. He cannot forget us, for He has died for us and bears the reminders of that sacrifice with Him always. He hears our prayers and cries for help. He gives us what is necessary to our bodies and lives. And even now He comes to us by means of Word and Communion to strengthen our feeble faith and to give us power and confidence to endure these last days. And He is coming again to put an end to tribulation. He says to the Church ““Your destroyers and those who laid you waste shall go away from you. Lift up your eyes, look around and see; all these gather together and come to you. As I live’ says the Lord, ‘You shall surely clothe yourselves with them all as an ornament and bind them on you as a bride does.’” And so the Christians are gathered by Christ to the Church His bride and are brought with

Him into paradise. He is coming to accomplish it. And He will not forget. For we are inscribed on His palms. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧