

“Ready for the Return, Part I”¹

Liturgical Date: Proper 28 B

Primary Text: St. Mark 13:1-13

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, is the Gospel lesson appointed from St. Mark, the 13th chapter. Near the end of the Church Year, much of the thrust of the readings is on the End Times, the Second Coming of Jesus, and the Final Judgment. In looking at the readings from Mark 13 this Sunday and the next, this two-part sermon will focus us in on the key aspects of these topics. The title of today’s sermon is “Ready for the Return, Part I.”

Recently, I have had a couple of people in the congregation ask me questions about the End Times and the return of Christ. Throughout my life I have learned that it is something people wonder about-and the end of the world in a broader context, and many people will talk about fairly regularly, even non-churchgoers. If I had a dollar for every time someone said (especially if they know I am pastor), “Do you think that we are living in the End Times?”, I would have a good bit of money. You may have had similar experiences. Many, many books and movies had been written and produced about the end of the world, from both a Christian and non-Christian perspective. Some of these books like *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series have sold tens of millions of copies. It is clear that people have a curiosity and interest in return of Jesus and the end of the world.

¹ This sermon was adapted from a single sermon by Rev. Aaron Reinking, “What You Need to Know About the Second Coming”. It has been revised and expanded to be in two parts.

There are so many questions that have been asked and so many people that have tried to answer them.

Today, I am going to make what may seem like a bold assertion. By the end of these two sermons, you will know everything you need to know about the End Times. You will know what you need to know to be ready for the return of Jesus. How is that possible? How could I possibly answer every question and pondering about the end of the world in two sermons? Notice that I did not tell you that you would know everything you may *want* to know about the End Times, but I will tell you everything you *need* to know.

Where do we find that? In the Bible, of course. The Bible has a good bit to say about the return of Jesus and the end of the world as we know it. Most people immediately think of the Book of Revelation, and while a great source, it is not the only place in the Bible that speaks of the End Times. Jesus spoke often about it. The Apostles did as well. The Old Testament prophets foretold of it.

And one of the places that God reveals to us about the return of Jesus is in St. Mark 13. Here, during Holy Week, Jesus is teaching what is known as the “Olivet Discourse”. It is also recorded in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. The sermon this week and next will draw directly on some of the things that our Lord teaches in our readings. It is also very important to note this: not everything in the Olivet Discourse is about the second coming of Christ. Jesus is also teaching about events that will happen about 35 years from that point in history. Much of what He teaches is about the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD. Theologians have debated some of the parts as what relates to which event, and some of the prophecies can be linked to both events. This sermon is not meant to parse every one of these

verses and dissect which one applies to which event. However, clearly a good bit of what our Lord is teaching here does relate to His Second Coming and we want to draw out the key themes here.

In knowing everything you need to know about the Second Coming and being ready for the return of Jesus, I will present 6 key truths. Two of these we will hear about today, and 4 of them will be for next Sunday. The first key truth I want to focus on is: Keep it simple, don't sweat the details.

Truth #1 Keep it Simple. Don't sweat the details.

One thing that can be intimidating and confusing about the Last Days, the return of Jesus, and the Final Judgement is that some people make it so dog-gone complicated. Countless books have been written seeking to parse every detail. Preachers, including many on the radio and TV, have pontificated about the signs and how we see this one and that one fulfilled. Timelines and charts have been produced. Theological theories have been formulated. There is traditional millennialism, postmillennialism, dispensational millennialism, and pre-dispensational millennialism. Then there is this idea of the (secret) "rapture", which is very popular in American Christianity. And even the people who teach this false idea of a secret rapture can't agree as you have pre-trib, mid-trib, and post-trib theories. All types of questions are posed: "What exactly will be the mark of the beast? What about the anti-Christ? Is He alive today? Will the Battle of Armageddon involve nuclear weapons?" It is enough to make your head spin.

Well, it may not surprise you to learn that we Lutherans are pretty "boring" when it comes to most of this End Times stuff-at least it would seem to many of the folks who want to make it complicated. We try not to get bogged down in all the minutia, nor should we read our Bible in one

hand and newspaper in the other trying to pinpoint biblical signs to current events. Over the centuries many have done just that and have ended up looking foolish. No complicated charts and timelines are need to understand what we teach about the Second Coming of Jesus. We simply confess what a vast majority of the Christian Church has believed for almost 20 centuries now.

I said earlier that the Bible has a lot to say about the end of the world and Second Coming. This is true, but so much of what it says comes back to the same themes and principles. Consider what the ancient creeds of the Church and our Luther Confessions say about this topic. From the Apostles' Creed: *"from thence He will come to judge the living and the dead"* and *"the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."* From the Nicene Creed: *"And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end"* and *"and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."* That is it. These great summaries of the essential doctrines of the Christian faith are pretty brief and to the point.

What about our Lutheran Confessions? I am going to read in its entirety Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession, titled "Christ's Return for Judgment."

Our churches teach that at the end of the world Christ will appear for judgment and will raise all the dead. He will give the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but He will condemn ungodly people and the devils to be tormented without end. Our churches condemn the Anabaptists who think that there will be an end to the punishments of the condemned men and devils. Our churches also condemn those who are spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.

I might have scared you when I said the whole article, but it really was not that long was it? What was the Roman Catholic response to this article, what were their criticisms of it? Philip Melanchthon writes this in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, *“Our adversaries accept Article XVII without qualification. In it we confess that Christ will appear at the consummation of the world. He will raise up all the dead and will give eternal life and eternal joys to the godly, but He will condemn the ungodly to endless punishment with the devil.”* You see, of all the things that the Reformers and Romanists battled over with the Augsburg Confession, this was not one of them. This is because the Bible is clear about the key thing that will happen at the end of the world: Jesus will return and judge the living and the dead. Those in Christ have eternal life and those who have rejected Him have eternal death. Can some of those other questions be interesting to look at? Perhaps. But they are not the things we need to know to be ready for the return. Keep it simple. Now we move on to...

Truth #2 Christians need not live in fear of the Final Judgment.

The End Times can often needlessly cause confusion and trepidation, even for many Christians. This is because we read the things that Jesus said about the End Times and we read the Book of Revelation and there is some “scary” stuff in there. A good part of our reading from St. Mark 13 today has Jesus giving signs that will take place in the future. Remember, some of what He is talking about is fulfilled in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. However, some of it points to His return as well-and likely some of these things can apply to both events.

People want to know when the things that Jesus speaks of will come to pass (more on that next week). His disciples even asked Him in verse 4, *“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all of*

these things are about to be accomplished.” The answer Jesus gives lists things that many people are familiar with: there will be false prophets that come claiming to be the Messiah, “wars and rumors of wars”, “nation will rise against nation”, “earthquakes in various places”, and “famines.” Now it goes without saying that these things have been happening since Jesus ascended. But perhaps even more terrifying than all of this is what Jesus talks about in verses 9-12. People will deliver God’s people over to the authorities for punishment. Even family members will turn on their own and send them off to die as martyrs for the Gospel.

I tell you this not to scare you, but to tell you the truth. One thing that is very clear in what the Bible has to say as the return of Jesus draws nigh, is that things will get worse in the world. They will get very bad, especially for Christians as persecution intensifies. Part of the appeal of the “rapture” taught by many is that Christians get “beamed up” and get to miss most of this. But that is not Biblical. God’s people will be here as the tribulations increase and we need to be ready to face any challenge.

But there is good news here too. After all, this second point is that we do not need to be fearful! It has been said that there are three types of people in the world: those who are fearful, those who don’t know enough to be fearful, and those who know their Bible. If you are part of the first or second group and hearing my voice today, I pray that this message would drive you to your knees in repentance and to the Word of God, which creates saving faith. God’s love casts out fear.

I rejoice with all of those in the third group. Because if you know and believe your Bible, you know the promises that God has for you. What words did Jesus close the Gospel Lesson with today? *“But the one that endures to the end will be saved.”* This is the message of the Book of

Revelation too. No matter how bad it gets, God has not abandoned us and will eternally save His people.

You also know that you are indeed a sinner who can do nothing to earn God's grace. But you also know that God loves you; He loves you so much that He sent His only Son to suffer, die, and rise again for your salvation. On the Day of Judgment you will hear, "Well done good and faithful servant." For the followers of Christ, that last day is not a day of condemnation, but a day of receiving your reward. Keep it simple. Do not be afraid. This is because, as one of our members recently noted in a Bible Study, there is only one question on the final exam. This is what we need to know to answer that question: The blood of Christ has covered and removed our many sins. By grace, through faith, He has washed us and raised us to new life to be enjoyed with Him in His everlasting Kingdom for all time.

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

Amen.