

Storm's a-Comin'

Text: Luke 21:25-36

Hymn: Enter Hymn here

The descriptions in the Bible of “the Day of the Lord,” the appearing of God to judge all peoples, are pretty unanimously terrifying. A day of deep darkness—sun, moon, and stars falling down from the heavens—when all evildoers will be like stubble and burned up, set ablaze by the day of the Lord’s appearing.

In our Gospel today, Jesus speaks some of the most forceful words in all of the Old and New Testaments. What a contrast from “Jesus the meek and mild” celebrated in so many of our Christmas carols! It’s true, by the way, that Jesus does have His mild moments, but they tend to be those moments when He is at the receiving of the world’s wrath. Jesus was very rarely mild in his speech. Even when He was being kind and forgiving, He was not mild. He was forceful. If you say to a person, “Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven,” that is not a mild thing to say. It’s a very violent thing to say—it’s just that the violence is directed against the sins to the benefit of the man in question, so he can take heart. But nobody ever gained by courage by someone being mild at him. If you want to have courage, you need fortifying. To make you more courageous, for example, a drill sergeant might send you on night marches without torches or, while other people are depending on you, put you in a tricky situation. All very stressful. But when you come through it, you will have grown in courage.

And so when Jesus begins to describe the day of the Lord, he doesn’t tone down the rhetoric. He doesn’t make it sound less scary. He borrows his language wholesale from his own Word, the Old Testament. We have signs in sun, moon, and stars and on

the earth distress of nations in perplexity, people fainting with fear and foreboding because of what is coming on the world.

We certainly live in a time when people have a fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world. Recently I heard an expert say that whether or not global climate change turns out to be the world-ending calamity some people forecast, there is a good chance nature itself will come to the rescue. How so? If the Yellowstone volcano were to erupt, it would pump into the air enough volcanic ash to block out the sun and end global warming. On the downside, it would also start a new ice age much of the northern hemisphere would experience a permanent twilight/dusk lasting for years and causing a global food shortage. How's that for good news/ bad news?

There is much to be concerned about. And Jesus nowhere promises that it will be all right in the sense that it will strike only the evildoers, as if only the wicked will be struck with fear and foreboding but Christians will get to sail through just nicely. As if, should some global catastrophe come, people will never see a dolphin again, unless they happen be on a boat with a Christian. No, the evil will strike just and unjust alike.

But Jesus speaks of these things in order to warn *and* to encourage us. Encourage by warning. What does that even mean? If you know that things are coming, if you know what to expect, you might indeed be filled with foreboding and fear, but the whole situation is transformed. The fear isn't taken away but it's put in perspective if you know the whole story. As you get to the end, you wonder, Is this all there is? Or is there more? If you know there is more, things might seem more bearable. If you are being put into a situation where you are experiencing great pain, for example, or you know you are about to, if you know this pain is temporary and there

will be relief and perhaps even benefit from it, you will approach it very differently than if you thought this is only going to get worse until you die.

One of Joseph Conrad's many great works is a short novel called *Typhoon*. It's a story about a ship suddenly menaced by a very severe storm. The ship is captained by a colorless but very competent man. What the captain does is turn his ship into the direction from which the great waves are coming. That is, he heads for the eye of the storm. Why does he do that? Because he knows, first, that if you go into the waves, you have a better chance of keeping your ship afloat than if you go sideways. But, also, that's the shortest route out. His crew and first mate all wonder what the heck he is doing but he knows this is the one way to save his ship and his crew and his cargo.

There is a great storm coming upon the world and that storm is called God's judgment on evildoers. And since God has planted us his people in the midst of the world, not in a monastery on an isolated mountain somewhere, but has placed us into this great field which is humanity as wheat among tares, we will experience that storm in our physical earthly existence in just the same way as everybody else. When you look at the world going wrong—and each generation has its own way of making life miserable for itself—what we see there is evil permeating God's creation, but we also see God's judgment on evil. The way of evil always comes to a nasty end. Sin just like righteousness comes with its own rewards. Because we live in the midst of a sinful world, and because sin clings to us too, the judgment of God upon sin is something we will inevitably experience with the rest of the world. But whenever we experience it in our time, whether it's through environmental destruction or nuclear war or a dormant super volcano becoming active again or any other kind of evil and suffering, it is a

reminder like that of the fig leaf that the judgment of God which we experience here will come upon the whole world when Jesus returns in glory. If you think this is bad, you ain't seen nothing yet! Because when the time of mercy and grace comes to an end and God's patience with evil comes to an end and He really tells us what He thinks about sin, that is when that all-consuming fire will be let out upon the earth. And all evildoers will be like stubble. The day will set them ablaze and the righteous will trample down on them as on ashes. That is what God has promised.

Yet it's an encouragement to us, because we know that whatever evils we witness in the world and around us and which we also have to endure, they have a day set for them and on that day they will come to an end. So, as things get worse, we are actually supposed to get *less crestfallen* and *more hopeful*. Because when God comes to judge wickedness, He will thereby come to redeem us from wickedness. We will no longer be oppressed by a corrupt creation or by evil people; better still, we will no longer be oppressed by the evil and sin that lives within ourselves, because that evil too will be destroyed and we will be raised to glory in the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have been promised by Scripture that we will be raised in glory like His, because His glory now is that of ascended, exalted humanity. *He* came in *our* likeness and so that that might be fulfilled *we* must be turned into *His* likeness, changed into what St. Paul calls incorruptibility and immortality. Is your body corruptible? Yes or no? Well, one day it will be incorruptible, your mind and soul, too. But to get to it we must first pass through the storm, the storm of God's judgment on the world, the storm that is raised when the creation sets itself against the Creator. We must endure to the end of the war, to the final battle, but that final battle has its outcome already determined

because the war has been won. All that we are currently experiencing is the enemies of God refusing to admit that the end has already been decided. When did the Second World War need to finish? The answer is it needed to end at that moment when one side was defeated. The reason it dragged on is that the defeated side decided not to surrender and fought on to the bitter end. Only when Berlin was reduced to rubble and Hiroshima and Nagasaki were no more did the fighting come to an end. And a lot of people died on both sides before then. But anybody who knew anything knew that a year and a half before the outcome was clear.

The devil has been defeated. Sin has lost. Jesus destroyed them and their power on the cross; they just haven't laid down their arms. But we who are members of the body of Christ are on the side of victory. And the only danger left to you from any of this is that you forget that. That you become complacent, that you fall asleep, that you let go of your salvation and wander away from the safety of the winning side and get yourself into no man's land and the defeated side. The purpose of Jesus telling you all of this is not to get you to worry *or* to say it's going to be all right. It won't be all right at all. Fear and foreboding. Fainting and perplexity. You will be in the midst of it. But what you need is endurance. He's telling us all of this that we may know to expect it and to have endurance, to be watchful and not fall asleep at our posts. Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipations and drunkenness and the cares of this life.

You will need endurance and endurance only comes if you're strengthened by God through His Word in a life of hearing, receiving, and praying. When you entrust yourselves to God in prayer and the study of God's Word, by receiving the Sacrament

and immersing yourself in the life of God's people so that we might encourage one another, strengthen one another, comfort one another, chastise one another if need be, then you are not standing on your own but in the strength of Jesus. And Jesus has already defeated all these things. He was faithful to the end. And look what came of that! He did not escape His fate. We are called to follow Him. And if we follow Him, we will certainly share in his glory.

And so this Advent time, let me remind you again of the purpose of Advent. The purpose of Advent is to prepare for the Coming of Christ in judgment so that we might be ready and not caught unawares, watchful and not asleep, sober and not drunk. The purpose of Advent is to heed the call to a renewed life of repentance and self-examination, of confessing our sins and developing new habits that are in accord with God's will, working to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit and put to death the works of the flesh. And evermore seeking again and again the mercy and the love of our Lord Jesus Christ in whom we already have victory over sin and death and the devil. He has promised it. And He will bring it to completion at the Last Day. Come, Lord Jesus.

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