

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved. That is what the Lord Himself teaches about the last days, the days that lead up to His coming in glory to judge the quick and the dead. There will be great tribulation, as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time.

And to that horrible prophecy, the Lord adds “no, nor ever shall be.” The days before the end of all time, the days preceding the complete destruction of this creation by consuming fire, the days just before the final judgment, will be terrible, worse than any time in history.

And yet it seems now as if it couldn't get any worse. Again this week we are praying for the survivors, the family and friends of the victims, and those who provide aid and relief in the aftermath of a mass shooting. It seems that these atrocities have become weekly events. Last week it was another Muslim shouting praise to his god and driving a truck into a crowd of people. Such horrors seem to be more and more common.

Mark well the Lord's Words: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time...” For most of us it seems that time has come upon us. We are increasingly shocked at the results of the godlessness of our society, indeed of this world. But we are always aware of the root cause – unbelief, the rejection and hatred of the very God who created man.

The devil was a murderer and a liar from the beginning. As the devil and his minions hold more sway over our society, as prayer and the study of Scripture are prevented in our public schools and civic events, as the symbols of the only true faith are driven from the public square, as Christians are ridiculed and persecuted in our country, satanic works will increase. As horrible as these atrocities are, as more frequent they become, still the Lord's Words warn us that they will grow worse.

More laws won't stop it. More restrictions on personal freedom won't stop it. More intrusions on privacy won't stop it. More government won't stop it. You see, men can't stop it. The problem is on the inside. Men are fallen. As Job, suffering difficult tribulation, asked: “For who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one!” No, the answer doesn't lie in fallen men.

The answer, the eternal answer, lies in God, the Triune God, the only True God, the God of love, the God of life. Fallen men must turn to God in repentance, seeking forgiveness and restoration, and confess Jesus Christ as Lord. But our society ridicules such men, it ridicules those who pray to the Triune God, and ridicules the God who alone can turn hearts, the God who alone can forgive sins.

But this isn't new. It is as old as the first terrorist, the deceiving serpent. It is as old as the first murder. It started with Abel. His offering was pleasing to God because it was made in faith, saving faith, faith in the promised Savior. But the sin of his father was visited upon his brother, and at the hand of his brother his earthly life was cut short.

The selfish, jealous, violent act of Cain simply opened heaven to Abel. And so it is with all Christian martyrs. As with faithful Stephen, the arrows, spears, swords, stones, bullets and trucks of this hateful and unbelieving world God uses to usher believing souls into Paradise.

But we are not in Paradise. We are still, for a time, for a short time, until the Lord comes, in this fallen world. And this world's prince works through unbelievers, and through your flesh, to cause you to doubt the Truth of Holy Scripture. The devil wants you to doubt the Biblical account of the life of Christ. The world discounts and rejects it. So-called "scholars" attack it. Our glitterati ridicule and mock it. All this is designed to make you question your faith, to create doubt in you.

But you are not left defenseless. You are not left alone. For you God became Man. He is Immanuel, God With Us. You have the Word of God. You have the Holy Law, which shows you your sin. The Law shows you that "man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower and fades away; he flees like a shadow and does not continue."

But the Word of God brings you the Holy Gospel. And that Gospel, that Saving Word, that eternal Promise of forgiveness and life, is the solution to all violence, to all sin, and to all death. For the center of the Gospel is Jesus Christ. He alone brings forgiveness and life. He is the Lord of Life. By His death are your sins forgiven. And by His rising to life again, you are declared holy and pure, without spot, just and righteous before God.

So the Apostle's Words, two thousand years old, are Words for you this day: "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus."

The Christian faith, the faith you received by the Holy Ghost in baptism, brings comfort and strength and peace to you as you live out your earthly life in this world. But that same faith, saving faith in Jesus Christ, avails more than comfort and strength in this world. It opens eternity to you, eternity in heaven.

And the proof of that, although faith needs no proof, is the resurrection. God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. Rant and rage as the world may, you have life that transcends this world. You have the forgiveness of your sins. You have peace with God.

And this day the grace of God spills over its heavenly bounds and fills the Paten and the Chalice. The Lord who died and rose for you gives you His Body to eat. He gives you His Blood to drink. The Lord of Life streams His life into you. The risen and ascended Lord comes to you in the Holy Eucharist, that you eat and drink and be forgiven; that you eat and drink and be strengthened; that you eat and drink and be comforted.

But soon, O Redeemed of Christ, soon these days will be cut short. Soon the consuming fire will bring to this perverted creation its just reward. "As the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." And the Lord will descend with a shout, the dead will rise, and we who are alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus you shall always be with the Lord.

St. Matthew 24:15-28
The Third-Last Sunday in the Church Year, 2017 A.✠ D.

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