

Stand Firm to the End!

(Luke 21:5-19) Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, ⁶“As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.” ⁷“Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” ⁸He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. ⁹When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.” ¹⁰Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. ¹²“But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³And so you will bear testimony to me. ¹⁴But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷Everyone will hate you because of me. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹Stand firm, and you will win life.

In Christ Jesus, our Great Defender and Shield, dear fellow redeemed,

“Extinction Level Event” – It sounds terrible, and of course it would be. It’s the term used to describe some catastrophic incident that would bring life, as we know it, to an end. This is the stuff that sci-fi movies are made of – films like Deep Impact, Armageddon, and 2012, all of which find our planet in the crosshairs of a large meteor or asteroid which is threatening to wipe us out. In all these movies, scientists scramble to try to figure out either how to avoid the catastrophe or how to survive it.

As it turns out, it’s not just movie producers who give thought to Extinction Level Events. Just last month, NASA completed a ten-month mission called DART (Double Asteroid Redirection Test) in which they purposely crashed a spaceship into an asteroid to see if they could alter its path. They were quick to point out that neither this nor any other asteroid poses any current threat to the earth. This was only a test.

Why do I mention this? Every now and again, I get the sense that the world around us thinks that we Christians are goofy when we talk about the end of time or the last day. In fact, in movies like those I just mentioned, it’s not unusual to find Christians represented by some cultish creep, standing on a street corner, holding a sign that reads, “THE END IS NEAR!” But as it turns out, a lot of people are giving the matter some thought and wondering what to do about it. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus speaks truth to us about the times in which we live and how to prepare for the day when life, as we know it, here and now, will end. He says to us Christians: Stand Firm to the End! 1) Don’t be deceived; 2) Don’t be afraid.

It’s Holy Week in Jerusalem. The city has given Jesus a royal welcome. He’s been spending his days at the Temple, teaching the people and putting his enemies in their place. It’s not hard to imagine that his disciples are excited about their future. They have dreamed of the day when Jesus would restore the kingdom to its former glory. That time seems to have arrived. You can almost picture them sitting with Jesus on the Mount of Olives at the end of the day, taking in the view of

the temple, thinking about the role it would play in the new order of things, and commenting on its magnificence and beauty. But their dream is dashed immediately by a dose of reality. “You see all this,” Jesus says pointing at temple, “...**the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.**” (Luke 21:6). As far as the disciples were concerned, Jesus might just as well have been announcing an extinction level event. “What are you talking about, Jesus? “When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” You can almost hear the wheels of their brains spinning as the disciples try to mesh the Teacher’s prophetic words with their own vision of the future.

Jesus doesn’t tell them “when” this will happen for the same reason a teacher won’t tell you when she’s going to give you a pop quiz. She doesn’t want you cramming the night before. She wants you to be ready at any time. Jesus wants his disciples to be ready. He doesn’t tell them when the temple will be destroyed, but he does give them some signs to watch for – signs that will serve them and us as ready reminders that the Last Day is coming.

Jesus provides his disciples, past and present, with two sets of signs – the first group of signs are rather general and ongoing. These are the signs that Jesus speaks of in verses 8-11 of our text. There he tells us that as the end of the temple and the end of time approach, there will be political unrest as nations rise against nations. There will be turmoil in creation itself as the world experiences famines and pestilences. And finally, he says, there will be great signs from heaven – perhaps on the order of the blood moon eclipse that appeared in the sky just this past week.

When we see and hear these things, we will want to remember that Jesus has told us about them and, more to the point, he wants us to associate them with the truth that this present age isn’t going to continue on forever. It’s really important for us to keep this in mind, so that we’re not deceived. Deceived by whom, by what? By Satan and his lies. Satan wants nothing more than to shake the foundation of our faith and in this way tear us away from Christ and his promises. To this end, the devil loves to send false “saviors” our way. In fact, the appearance of these false “saviors” is one of the signs of the end. Jesus says: “**Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them.**” (Luke 21:8). These false saviors will try to play on our doubts, using the upheavals in society and nature like flash grenades to throw us into confusion. The devil is always striving to get us to question the relevance of Jesus’ teachings for our everyday lives. “Why” he whispers, “are you devoting time and attention to an ancient teacher when your world is falling apart around you?” The implication, of course, is that there are better leaders to follow – political leaders who will put an end to war and poverty; scientific leaders who will do away with hunger and disease. It’s the very deception by which Satan took down humanity in Eden: “If we hope to survive, we humans must, and we can, pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Give us enough time and enough resources and we’ll solve every problem we face.”

“Do not follow the false saviors” Jesus says. Why? Because they can’t fix what’s really wrong with us. The troubles we face in our personal lives, in our society, and in our world are all the result of sin. God made and gave us a perfect world and told us how to keep it that way. But when we humans refused to listen to him, we broke everything. We broke our relationship with God and each other. Our sin brought trouble, sorrow, and death to us and our world. And here’s the sobering truth: We sinners can’t fix ourselves, because we can’t fix sin. We can’t rid ourselves of it. There’s no medicine or surgery that can remove it, and no science that can counter its effects. Only God, the very God we sinned against, can help us. What a predicament. Why would God want to help the people who rejected him? The answer he gives is as amazing as it is simple. He wants to help us, he has helped us, because **God is love. (John 4:16)**. Salvation, our salvation, the world’s salvation is found in this truth alone. But to know God’s love, to believe in and cherish his love, means coming to grips with the truth that we are helpless sinners, forever doomed and damned without Jesus. But with Jesus, we are forever safe and saved. So, contrary to the dream of those first disciples, Jesus’ vision for his church and our world has nothing to do with establishing an

earthly kingdom with headquartered in Jerusalem's beautiful temple. His vision is to send out his disciples for the rest of time to share the message of sin and grace with a world hopelessly lost.

It's this vision and mission that prompted Jesus to share with his disciples another set of signs that the end is coming, signs more personal and immediate in nature. Jesus says: **"But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name."** (Luke 21:12).

Proclaiming the saving name of Jesus means that we must first tell people about their sin. Jesus himself once said: **"It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** (Luke 5:31). People need to know that they are terminally and eternally ill with sin before they will listen to what the Great Physician of their souls has to say to them. But of course, people don't want to hear about their sin—not in the days of Peter, James and John, and not in our own day and age. Talk of sin makes people angry and hateful even as they call us "haters" for pointing out that what they are doing and saying goes against God and his will. In fact, we shouldn't be surprised that in these last days, we may be hauled into court or jailed for speaking the truth. And it won't be just strangers who turn on us. Jesus adds: **"You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ Everyone will hate you because of me."** (Luke 21:16). It's frightening to think that our lives could be turned upside down because of our faith in Jesus. I don't like the thought that I could be sued for what I preach and teach. I like even less the idea that I could lose friends or be disowned by family members because of the truth I hold and speak in love and concern for people's eternal well-being.

Jesus knows that we will face tremendous pressure to abandon him as time wears on and comes to its end. He takes no pleasure in telling us these things, but he refuses to sugarcoat what sin and Satan will try to do to us, because he doesn't want us to be caught off guard or afraid. Instead, he wants us to live out these days, confident that he not only knows our future but is in full control of it. He has plans to bless us and make us a blessing to people everywhere. Did you hear what he told his first disciples after warning them that they might find themselves in some very uncomfortable circumstances? **"And so you will bear testimony to me."** (Luke 21:13). In other words, what looks like trouble will really be an opportunity to speak the saving name of Jesus in places and to people we could never have imagined. St. Paul got to do this while under arrest in Rome where, as Scripture reports, members of Caesar's household became followers of Jesus! Amazing! Right? Jesus can do the same with us, because it won't depend on us to persuade anyone to become a believer. Jesus promises: **"For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."** (Luke 21:15).

So, don't be deceived and don't be afraid, dear Christians. Stand firm to the end by holding to the good news that Jesus is our Defender and Shield. He completed the most successful rescue mission of all times, one beyond Hollywood's wildest imagination. For when God's rightful wrath was bearing down on us sinners, threatening our everlasting destruction, Jesus stood between us and that wrath. At the Father's command, he suffered our hell and so took the full brunt of sin's punishment in our place. Now, not even the grave can hurt us. To prove it, Jesus broke the bonds of death on Easter Sunday and now lives to assure us that whether we die in the faith or live to see his return, the Last Day, Judgment Day will be our Victory Day and the beginning of a perfect life without end. Remember, no matter what happens to us between now and the Last Day, we will come through it all unscathed. Not one hair of your head will perish. You, my friend, are safe in Jesus because you are his forever. Amen.