

Redemption is Near
Second in a Series, “Finishing Strong”
November 12 and 13, 2022 / Recognition of Veterans

Luke 21: 28 Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

Dear Friends in Christ,

According to a World War II historian Professor Konrod Kwiet, there were 720,000 people from all over Europe incarcerated in concentration camps in January of 1945. On January 27, Russian soldiers liberated 4,800 inmates from Auschwitz. As the Allied forces approached, orders were given to evacuate the camps and erase the evidence of crimes perpetrated there. The evacuations turned into death marches, unfolding in full public view. Thousands survived. Hundreds of thousands perished.

This morning, as we recognize the veterans in our midst, we honor those who have been willing to give their own lives so that others might live free. And today, we give special attention to those incarcerated in WWII concentration camps and what they were thinking and feeling and doing as their liberators approached.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and its magnificent temple, which in fact happened in 70 a.d. He goes on to predict what people will be thinking and feeling and doing in the end times just before the Redeemer of this world returns in glory. The times will be so distressing and perplexing that those who have not been paying attention to God’s Word will be fainting with fear and bent over with anxiety. But for those who have been hearing using their ears to hear, the Last Day will be a day of Good News.

Our sermon series in November is under the theme, “Finishing Strong.” Last weekend our theme was “Clothed in White Robes” / All Saints’ Sunday. Next weekend our theme is “Test Me and See” / Stewardship Sunday. Today, our theme is “Redemption is Near.”

Two lessons we would learn again this morning. 1) Do not be terrified, and 2) Get ready to witness.

Lesson #1 - Redemption is near, therefore do not be terrified.

Disciples in all the generations have all kinds of reasons to be afraid. False and persuasive and popular teachers are constantly leading people astray. Wars and revolutions prove again and again that humanity will never solve its own problems. Earthquakes and famines and plagues and natural disasters terrify millions of people at a time, often when they least expect it.

This past Tuesday night, I watched hours and hours of election returns. Some of the results made me want to sing, but one result in particular makes me want to vomit. The result that truly terrifies me into the darkness of the night is the success of legislation legalizing unrestricted abortion through the ninth month of pregnancy.

My first impulse is to strike out against this madness with fire and brimstone. And certainly there is a time and a place to speak the harsh truths of the fifth commandment which insists that we help and befriend our neighbors in every bodily need instead of hurting or harming. But first and foremost this week, we hear Jesus whispering into our ears, “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and rise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Do not panic, stay calm, and know that your help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Luke had reason to be afraid, as he lay in a nursing home, soon to breath his last./ faithful patriarch of the church in his 90’s / I’ve been his pastor for 20 years / as I approach, you would think I could have thought of a better opening question, but I ask, “Luke, how are you doing?” His response, “ok.” Even as he struggled for breath, he wasn’t terrified, soon the angels would be carrying him into the presence of his Savior. He stayed calm, knowing that final redemption was near.

Ted had much to be afraid of, as he lay in a nursing home, soon to die. / faithful member of the church / WWI veteran who was a man’s kind of a man / hard of hearing / in his 90’s in a Mankato nursing home / at night, others are sleeping / I approach and ask quietly if he is afraid / he can’t hear, and so he asks to repeat, and again he asks me to repeat / finally I shout, “Are you afraid?” / He hears and grumbles in reply, “What the hell is there to be afraid of?” / Even as he marched towards death, he wasn’t terrified, he knew that the God who made heaven and earth was the same God who had numbered every hair on his head. He fell asleep in peace, knowing that final redemption was near.

Lesson #2 - Redemption is near, therefore get ready to witness.

In our text for today, Jesus is first of all talking of the persecution Christians would face preceding 70 a.d., when Jerusalem would be destroyed. He warns his disciples that they will suffer betrayal just as he is about to be betrayed and that they must be prepared if they are to persevere to the end.

The days would come when the early Christians would be brought to the synagogues for interrogation, they would be imprisoned and dragged before kings and emperors for beatings and worse. Even their own families would betray them. Jesus knew first-hand what it meant for his brothers to reject and betray, which is why he redefined family as created not by bloodlines, but by the power of His Word.

Which brings us to the second lesson of the day and the real purpose of persecution. Jesus would look us in the eyes today, as He looked His first disciples in the eyes, ***“This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”***

Is Jesus saying here that we should approach opportunities to witness spontaneously and that we shouldn't worry about being prepared to give a witness? Not at all. Other Scriptures urge us to be ready to give a defense of the hope that is inside of us. The disciples knew Scriptures well. They had attended synagogue schools as youngsters. They had committed large sections to memory. Their hearts were storehouses of God's Word.

The Greek word for witness is *martyria*, suggesting that to be a witness for Jesus Christ as the one way to be saved will bring on suffering and worse. Church historians tell us that Simon Peter was crucified, perhaps upside down, for preaching Christ. James, son of Zebedee, was put to death by Herod Agrippa, for testifying. Andrew was crucified. Matthew was martyred in Ethiopia, according to legend. Thomas martyred by a lance in India and Persia. James the son of Alphaeus was thrown from the temple by scribes and Pharisees, then stoned, then finished off with a club. Jude, also called Thaddeus, was martyred in what we call modern day Iran, according to secular historians.

Dear friends in Christ, to finish strong in our Christian faith is to be growing in our faith through all the ups and down of life, right to the end, which may well be bitter. To finish strong, first of all, is to stay calm, no matter how disturbing the trends of society are. And secondly, it is to stay fired up, in terms of giving clear and honest witness to Jesus Christ in all the seasons of life.

Our Lord's promise here is that he will provide the fitting words also to our minds when we are placed into difficulty by our faithfulness to the Gospel. He will do so out of the treasure of His Word that we store up in our hearts. We would be encouraged today not just to drink the milk of the Gospel but also to be chewing on some of the meat that challenges us regarding discipleship.

For many years, I was a member of the Rotary Club International. Our club's motto was and is "Service Above Self. One of our more famous projects was to eradicate polio across the planet, a goal I'm told is 99.9% complete. One of the more helpful tidbits I remember from Rotary is their encouragement for every member to prepare and wear a Rotary pin and prepare an "elevator talk." In other words, you would ride in an elevator, and when somebody asked you what it meant to be a Rotarian, you would give them a half minute or one minute testimony as to why you belonged to the Rotary Club.

This morning, in closing, we would clarify in our minds what it means to be the precious and loved and forgiven people of God. What it means to see all that is going on in our world and to know that redemption is drawing near.

The world sees tropical storms and blizzards wreaking havoc up and down the countryside and bend over in fear, but Christians stand up straight and fix their eyes on the Son of Man soon to return. The world hears of wars and rumors of wars and is terrified, but Christians look to the cross where Jesus Christ has already met up with and defeated once and for the powers of darkness. The world sees chaos and crime running rampant in the streets and they hunker down with hearts that are trembling, but the baptized and believing people of God go running for refuge and strength to the one true God, who has earned the right to be feared and trusted and loved above all things.

The world sees all that is wrong and broken in life and they are worried and weighed down with car payments and house payments and credit card payments, but those who have been using their ears to hear God's Word are resting in the fact that Jesus Christ made full and complete payment for every one of their sinful thoughts/sinful actions/sinful words/sinful habits/sins of omissions.

The signs of the end times have always been with us. They are with us today. And they will be with us into the future. Every single one of them is to be seen as an opportunity to witness. To witness to what we have seen and heard with regard to the goodness, the patience, the purposes, the grace, the mercy of our God.

In closing today, I invite you to think back on the witness of your parents, your Sunday School teachers, your aunts and uncles, your friends, your spouses, anyone who has helped you to know Jesus as Savior and Lord in all the chapters of life.

I think back to Friday the 13th of December, 1996, when a young man named Nathan was killed in a two car accident near the small town in which we lived. Nathan was the son of friends of ours, he was a classmate of our son also called Nathan. He was a terrific student, a disciplined athlete, he had a smile that lit up the room, he had a bright future in front of him, a beautiful girl friend. But on a foggy cold December morning, his earthly life came to a horrible end. I remember sitting in a small room in St. Mary's Hospital, 4th floor, Rochester, with his parents Sandy and Ivan. A team of doctors came in and delivered the news that there was no hope for him to live. It was as if they had taken a two by four and whacked his dear mom as hard as you could. Total devastation. There was silence, we embraced, and within a few minutes, the first words out of his mom's mouth were, "God must have a reason."

God must have a reason. That was her witness. That was her way of straightening up, raising her head, and lifting up her eyes unto the Lord. Redemption was drawing near for her beloved Son.

Don't get me wrong. Her grief was far from over. In fact, she and Ivan cry to this day, and they cry hard. But this was their witness to me and those doctors in that crowded little waiting room 26 years ago - and this is their witness to you today - that God is to be trusted and Jesus is to be believed, no matter what. In Jesus' Name. Amen.