

TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR NOVEMBER 13-14, 2022

⁵ *As some were talking about the temple, how it was decorated with beautiful stones and offerings, Jesus said,* ⁶ *“These things that you see here—the days will come when there will not be one stone left on another—every one will be thrown down.”*

⁷ *They asked him, “Teacher, when will these things happen? And what is the sign that these things are about to happen?”*

⁸ *He said, “Watch out so that you are not deceived! For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them.* ⁹ *Whenever you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be terrified, for these things must happen first, but the end will not be right then.”*

¹⁰ *Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.* ¹¹ *There will be great earthquakes, famines, and plagues in various places. There will be horrifying sights and great signs from heaven.* ¹² *But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, handing you over to synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name’s sake.* ¹³ *It will turn out to be your opportunity to testify.* ¹⁴ *So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand how to defend yourselves,* ¹⁵ *for I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.* ¹⁶ *You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will put some of you to death.* ¹⁷ *You will be hated by all people for my name’s sake.* ¹⁸ *But not a hair of your head will perish.* ¹⁹ *By patient endurance you will gain your lives.* (Luke 21:5-19 EHV)

Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859. The novel opens with, **“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity...”** That could describe our day, our times. From a Christian point of view, we also know that we are living in the end times as the time of Jesus’ return and the Last Day draw ever closer. Could we say this: **THE END TIMES ARE THE BEST OF TIMES**. These latter days of world history, these days of extreme polarization, increasing worldwide conflict, economic uncertainty and stress and struggle – these are the best of times.

What kind of a theme is this? Who says stuff like this? Who thinks like this? Who would say such a thing? God’s people do, because it’s true. Look at the world without Jesus, and yes, it’s scary, frightening, chaotic. But Jesus is not only in the mix, he’s not only in the picture, he **“is over all and through all and in all.”** (Ephesians 4:6) **“In him all things hold together.”** (Colossians 1:17b) And to his disciples, both in the 1st century AD and in the present day, he offers three encouragements.

First, be wary. It’s Tuesday of Holy Week. There’s a sense of urgency to Jesus’ teaching, much of which takes place near the Temple in Jerusalem. King Herod had been an obnoxious, self-serving ruler, but he had spared no expense in remodeling the Temple for the Jews. It was an impressive, expensive building. Some of the stones were 60 feet long and more than 7 feet high. To think that mere mortals could cut such massive stones to such exact specifications and then move them and then assemble into such a magnificent structure! The disciples were awestruck.

But Jesus said, **“These things that you see here—the days will come when there will not be one stone left on another—every one will be thrown down.”** (v. 6) The disciples can’t believe it? This majestic building reduced to rubble? When? Soon? And how will we know? What are the signs?

“When?” and “What?” are the wrong questions to ask. Jesus meets them with “Watch out” and “Don’t be afraid.” **“Watch out so that you are not deceived! For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. Whenever you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be terrified, for these things must happen first, but the end will not be right then.”** (vv. 8-9)

Be wary. The media – television preachers, online preachers, social media, websites, books – is full to bursting with so-called prophets who claim to know what’s happening next and when. They claim to have the key to unlock the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation. Be wary. Heed Jesus’ warning: **“Do not follow them.”** (v. 8b) The future is not ours to know – at least not in detail. Even Jesus himself – according to Jesus himself – did not know at that time what the day of his return was going to be: **“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”** (Mark 13:32)

Jesus’ second encouragement is: Be ready. Martin Luther once said that we’re all like a bunch of drunken peasants: we either fall off one side of the horse or the other. And that’s true of how we deal with passages such as this one. On the one hand, there are those who get all wrapped up in dates and signs and clues and codes. On the other hand, it’s all too easy to consider all this with a yawn and say, “Oh, yeah, that’s right, the end is coming. Sometime. Whenever. Whatever. Yada yada yada, blah, blah, blah.”

It’s hard to maintain a constant state of readiness, to never let down our guard. Jesus offers more signs of the end: **“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines, and plagues in various places. There will be horrifying sights and great signs from heaven.”** (vv. 10,11) Nothing new here. Seen it all. Heard it all. All of these have occurred multiple times in our lifetimes. Kind of takes the edge off the sense of urgency.

After the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples actually thought the end would come in a matter of months or years, during their lifetime. It didn’t. 2000 years later, we’re still supposed to live as though the end might come at any time. But it hasn’t yet. Peter wrote **“For the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.”** (2 Peter 3:8)

Considering all this, how do we maintain a sense of imminence? How do we live as though the end could come at any time? Here’s the bottom line: for every one of us the time is near. The hour is hastening on. Every one of us will die. We don’t know how or when but we will. It could be today; it could be decades from now. You may have already enjoyed your last Christmas on this earth, or you may still have dozens of Decembers yet to live through. We don’t know when. But we do know that it will happen. We live in the shadow of eternity. Be ready.

I once had a Chase credit card that ended with the numbers “666.” On one occasion, a sales clerk noticed and asked, “Should you be using that card? That’s the number of the beast/Satan. Doesn’t that give you the creeps?” I replied, “No, it’s just a number; it’s just a credit card. It’s not like I’m carrying Satan around in my wallet. I’ve got Jesus in my heart. That card is actually a good reminder to be ready for the day when Satan meets his end.” 666 is just a number. Satan is just an adversary. We don’t want to take him lightly, but he does not have the last word about the last day. That belongs to Jesus.

The end times isn’t something to fear. Jesus’ final encouragement: Be confident. Here are some sobering words from Jesus: **“Before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, handing you over to synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name’s sake. It will turn out to be your opportunity to testify.”** (vv. 12,13) This happened to all of Jesus’ 12 disciples and to many of his followers then and all throughout history to the present day. Has it happened to you? Not to this extent. Nor have we faced this: **“You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will put some of you to death.”** (vv. 15-16)

In our life experience, Satan doesn’t use the “front door” approach of persecution. Christians in centuries past knew persecution when they saw it. They knew that taking a stand on the Gospel of Jesus Christ meant that they would endure physical and emotional persecution. In some cases, they were faced with a clear-cut choice: either denounce their faith in Jesus or die confessing Jesus as their Savior.

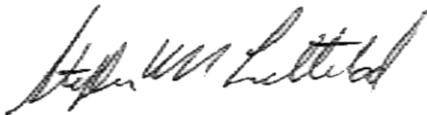
Today the devil uses more of a sneaky “back door” approach. The persecutions we face today are much more subtle, but they are no less real. In fact, they are just as dangerous to our faith as they erode values and morals and convictions. Christians who hold to the infallibility and authority of Scripture are called “Bible-thumpers.” Peer pressure at school/work/political sphere has as its goal to ridicule Christians who believe in

things like a six-day creation, that God creates us either male or female, that the basis of society is marriage and family consisting of one man and one woman and children as God blesses.

Jesus' words apply to you and to me: ***"(This is) your opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand how to defend yourselves, for I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict...You will be hated by all people for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By patient endurance you will gain your lives."*** (vv. 13-15, 17-19)

Be confident. Know that in Christ, all the battles that need to be won have already been won. That's what Calvary's empty cross and Easter morning's empty tomb clearly proclaim. All this talk about signs and wars and threats and upheaval is not meant to scare, but to assure. To assure us that no matter what happens, there will be no surprises for God in our future. He holds it all in his hands. He holds you in the palm of his hand, close to his heart.

Be confident. God hovers over his creation (over you!) not as a master waiting to lash out at a faltering slave, but as a mother seeking to comfort a hurting child, a father seeking to bring back a wayward son. He speaks judgment not to destroy, but to warn and call us to repentance. He sent his Son in human flesh in order to bear our sin and death that we might be forgiven and made new and look forward to the end of all things, which is the beginning of the rest of eternity. Thanks to Jesus, the end times are the best of times. Be wary. Be ready. Be confident.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Stephen W. Luchterhand". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pastor Stephen Luchterhand
Minocqua, WI