

*July 29 & August 2, 2020 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost*

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Joel 3:12-16 *¹² Let the nations be roused. Let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will be seated to judge all the nations. ¹³ Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow, because the nations' wickedness is so great! ¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes in the Valley of Decision! For the Day of the LORD is near in the Valley of Decision. ¹⁵ The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars will stop shining. ¹⁶ The LORD will roar from Zion and shout from Jerusalem. The sky and the earth will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.*

The thermometer must have almost popped when temperatures reached 57C (134F). That's the second hottest temperature ever recorded anywhere in the world. The shade of night doesn't bring much relief here either. Midnight temperatures have hit 44C (112F)! In 1929 and again in 1953 not a drop of rain fell in this location. Does this sound like a place you'd like to visit? Many do. This is Death Valley, a national park located in the state of California. If you plan on visiting Death Valley, you'll want to check out the visitor's guide the U.S. National Park Service produces. This guide instructs you to carry four liters of water per person per day and to make sure you have a working spare tire in case you get a flat. You don't want to get stuck in temperatures hot enough to fry an egg on the pavement. With the proper precautions, however, Death Valley can be delightful as there are soaring mountains and rolling sand dunes to explore. The night sky is said to be stunning. And right now there is even a comet visible.

You may never get to Death Valley but every one of you here and every person who has ever lived will one day stand in Decision Valley. You won't find this valley on any map because it's more of an event than a location. Decision Valley is our sermon text's name for Judgment Day. Just as Death Valley can bring dismay or delight depending on how well one is prepared, Decision Valley too will either bring dismay or delight. Which awaits you?

Decision Valley is also called the Valley of Jehoshaphat in our text. Jehoshaphat means "the Lord judges" and that's what's going to happen in Decision Valley. Jehoshaphat was also the name of the fourth king of Judah who saw God's judgment unfold in a valley east of Jerusalem. Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites had invaded Judah with what was described as a "vast" army. Jehoshaphat turned to the Lord for help and he wasn't disappointed. When he and his men arrived at the battleground, they didn't find a single enemy soldier alive. God had caused the enemy to fight one another.

In our text God wants us to know that what happened during King Jehoshaphat's day is going to happen again on Judgment Day: God will destroy his enemies. God put it this way in our

text: *“Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. 10 Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears... 12 ‘Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side” (Joel 3:9, 10a, 12).*

Micah and Isaiah promised the spiritual and eternal peace that come through the Messiah by saying that the people should beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Now Joel as he speaks about Judgment Day says just the opposite. The proud nations are warned that the final battle is about to commence. We are reminded of Paul’s words: *“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).*

God sounds like a hotshot warrior taunting his enemy to grapple with him. He even gives them the chance to arm themselves for the confrontation. That would be like the Portland, Oregon police saying to the anarchists: “Go ahead, pack your backpacks with all the Molotov cocktails you can carry.” Or Japan and South Korea goading rogue governments like North Korea: “Come on. Fire all your nuclear missiles at us at the same time!” Or the freshman in college saying to his atheistic professor: “Can you tell me again why you don’t believe in God, Professor? Hit with me your best arguments. Bring it on!” If you talk that way, you better be able to back it up with might and smarts. And God does. God is so confident of victory he doesn’t even stand up to meet the invading army! He just sits coolly on his throne, for there will be no battle but only judgment and you’ll be there to hear the verdict. Our text goes on to say, *“Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow – so great is their wickedness! Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵ The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. ¹⁶ The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble” (Joel 3:13b-16a).*

These are pictures of God’s final act of separation. His time of grace for the world will end on judgment day. He will bring the world’s history to a close. John the Baptist said of Jesus, *“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12).* Isaiah uses the image of a winepress to picture the Messiah as the judge of the nations: *“I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath” (Isaiah 63:3).*

Decision Valley will be dismaying for all who laughed at the idea that there is a God. God is going to squish those who attacked his church as easily as you and I can squash a grape with the heel of our foot. But Decision Valley will also be dismaying for those who outwardly lived decent lives thinking that this was good enough for entrance into heaven and saw no need to put their trust in Jesus as their savior. They’ll no doubt try to plead their case before God as to why they are worthy of heaven but they won’t even get a word in – not when God is described as roaring from Zion – roaring so loudly that even the earth and sky will tremble, and the sun, moon, and stars won’t dare show their countenance.

But if God is roaring, won't that be scary for us too?. Think of the lion cub who has wandered away from the pride. He stumbles in unfamiliar territory and finds himself surrounded by hyenas and jackals that can't wait to tear this little cub to pieces. But out of nowhere there's a roar. It's mama or father lion come to the rescue. That roar sends the hyenas scampering with tails tucked between their legs. The roar brings dismay to those predators but delight to the cub. It's the sound of rescue and safety. And so is the roar of the Lord on Judgment Day because it will be the roar of the Lion of Judah, our savior and refuge. In fact God said in our text: *"But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel" (Joel 3:16b).*

How exactly will Jesus be our refuge in Decision Valley? They say that many miners crossed Death Valley during the gold rush in the mid 1800's. How would you like to walk, or ride in a horse-drawn wagon through such unrelenting heat? Many didn't make it. We've probably all seen the caricature of the skeleton lying in the desert. Nowadays it's a relative cinch to cross Death Valley – especially if you're cruising in an air-conditioned car. The pavement outside might be hot enough to fry an egg on but you'd never know it since the rubber of your tires is absorbing the heat. The sun may be beating down but you won't get a sunburn because the roof of your car gives you shade. In the same way the blood Jesus shed on the cross surrounds us and keeps us safe from God's anger against all of our sins.

But here's the thing, Decision Valley will only be a delight if Jesus remains our refuge. In our text God also said: *"Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe" (Joel 3:13a).* Comparing Judgment Day to harvest day is an illustration that Jesus used in our Gospel lesson this morning (Matthew 13:24-43). It's so familiar that we may fail to see ourselves in the picture. Perhaps this illustration will make us take pause. A farmer noticed that every autumn a tragedy played out in his cornfields. All summer long families of field mice had made their homes among the growing plants. They ate and slept, they worked and played and raised their families. The mice imagined that those green fields belonged to them. But then one day, at the end of the summer, the mouse community got an awful shock. The farmer entered the fields with his harvesting machinery and all of a sudden those comfortable summer homes and food pantries that the mice had enjoyed came crashing down on their heads.

Can you see any similarity here between mice and men? Do we look upon this world as our home and so day after day go off to work, earn money, play, fall in love, get married and have children, imagining that this world is our home and will always be our home? If you think of the mice though, you might want to ask yourself: "Am I forgetting that this world is not mine...that it's just a temporary place to stay...that harvest day is nearly upon us?"

But knowing that a day of judgment is coming is not the same as being ready for it. Simply knowing that sun tan lotion can keep me safe from the sun does me no good. I actually need to apply it early and often to stay protected. Sure I may have applied Jesus' forgiveness last week and repented of my sins but what about this week? Could it be that I have shoved Jesus in the corner like a bottle of sunscreen? Do I think that I still I have time to repent of my pet

sins, or forgive that grudge because Jesus hasn't returned yet? Isn't that like failing to put on sunscreen because you think that because it's cloudy out you can't get burned?

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. *Whoever believes in him is not condemned*" (John 3:17, 18). The final judgment only makes known a decision of grace that God made when he chose us from eternity to be his own and then redeemed us from all sin by the blood of his Son.

Friends, if you were headed to Death Valley this week, I know you would be busy making preparations. You'd make sure you'd have enough sun block and have rented a reliable vehicle to take you through the park. So why not check on your preparations for going to Decision Valley? We're all headed there. In fact we might even arrive this week! What awaits YOU there? Dismay because you have spent your time and energy trying to get comfortable here forgetting that there is more to come? Dismay because you refused to repent of some sin? Don't let that happen. Give ear to the gentle whisper of God's call to repentance now so that you won't be blown away by the roar of his justice on Judgment Day. Keep taking refuge in Jesus so that Decision Valley will be a delight. It will be a delight because there I will see my Lord flex his muscles so that Satan and his allies, and sickness and death will never be able to hurt me again. Amen.