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Pentecost 23 – Luke 21:5-19 – The Signs of the Times

11/9-13/22 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

Is it just me or have we been hearing a lot about the signs of the times lately? Normally when people talk about those things, they're talking about wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and so forth – things going on in the world around us that are meant to wake us up and put us on alert that something big is coming, and so we should pay attention, put our house in order (so to speak), and make sure we're right with God.

But as you can tell from supermarket tabloids and trending Facebook topics, the fact is that there are a lot of people who see all the upheaval going on around us, and it terrifies them. Is this the beginning of the great tribulation? Am I and my family going to be safe? What's it going to be like when Jesus comes back and I have to stand before his judgment seat? At first glance there's a lot to be scared of, when we look around the world and even when we look at this sermon text.

But I wonder why we always focus on the bad. Why don't we focus on the good? Because it's definitely there! That's what I hope we can do today – think less about the negative, less about the difficult journey, and much more about the positive, the so-very-worthwhile destination. See, the signs of the times aren't meant to unsettle us or give us anxiety about Jesus' coming. They're meant to remind us that our Savior could come back for us anytime – he hasn't forgotten about us! – and so we need to stay always ready to receive him in faith. For believers, the signs of the times shouldn't make us fearful for our lives now; they should most of all make us look forward to Jesus coming back and putting an end to conflicts and natural disasters and everything else like them forever.

So here's the first thing Jesus said about the signs of the times. As Jesus and his disciples were on their way out of the temple area in Jerusalem on Tuesday evening of Holy Week, some of the disciples marveled out loud at how big and beautiful that amazing structure was. But Jesus said: *“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.”* That must have stopped the disciples in their tracks. The Jerusalem temple had already been destroyed once, about 600 years earlier. That was the darkest time in the history of the people of Israel. Would God really allow that terrible tragedy to happen again?

Well, yes, Jesus said – that magnificent temple would be destroyed, and this time it would never be rebuilt. That happened in the year 70 AD, about 40 years

after Jesus' ministry, at the hands of the Roman army. But the truth is, after Jesus lived and died and rose again, that temple was really just an empty shell anyway. Now its sentimental value was high as the heavens as far as the Jews were concerned and it would hurt like nothing else to see it leveled, but you might say the temple being destroyed was the first sign of the end times – a dramatic change from the way things once were to the way they're going to be from now on. See, the temple was where God promised to dwell with his people. But now that Jesus has finished his ministry and ascended back to heaven, his temple isn't a building anymore. It's us – we, the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, the sum total of all believers of all times and places... *we* are his temple. By faith in Jesus Christ, our God dwells among us because he lives in our hearts. The old Jerusalem temple might be destroyed, but we, his people, never will be. And with every new person who comes to faith, this new temple is proving even greater and grander than that old temple could ever hope to be.

So Jesus told the disciples, it's not the old temple that needs protecting – it's the new temple. *“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. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”* Many will come, Jesus says, who will proclaim themselves Savior, Lord, and King. But remember that you have one Savior, and his job was finished when he died and rose again. You have one Lord, and he's head over heaven and earth for your good even right now. You have one King, his kingdom is not of this world, and when he comes back, *everyone* is going to know it. So don't be deceived and don't be frightened, because whether it's Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam or any of the ungodly, unbiblical ideas hiding behind science or academia or anything else, God's Word enlightens us and empowers us to stand up to their temptations and lies. In fact, really these signs of the times should give peace and comfort to our souls, because that means it's happening just as Jesus said it would. It's all a part of his grand plan, he's in total control from beginning to end, and one day he's going to bring us to heaven where God will dwell with his people and we will see him face-to-face forever.

It just might be a while yet, as Jesus said. And in the meantime, *“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you.”* Again, that all seems very scary, doesn't it? There will be troubles, trials, and tribulations from all around and every which way – in society, in nature, and even in the church – that will only get more and more severe and dangerous as time goes on.

But as scary and negative as that all might seem, here's the greater positive: *"This will result in your being witnesses to them... I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."* You know, there's an old saying that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Where Christians boldly confess their faith in their life – and even especially in their death – the church can't help but grow, because when people hear the truth and see that level of conviction along with it, that is a powerful testimony to the saving work of Christ. There is hardly a better time to reach people than when someone is dying, when someone is going through a really hard time in life, or when someone is put on trial for what they believe. If that person can share their light of hope even in the darkness of their distress, God promises to use those situations to bear fruit in the hearts of people around us.

And if you're worried about what to say, God's already given you the words. They're right here in the Bible. That's why we put such a strong emphasis on public worship and Bible study and confirmation class and yes, even that dreaded memory work – it's so that you can learn God's Word and love God's Word and ultimately share God's Word with anyone around you who will hear it. God's Word is infallible – it cannot fail! – and nothing can stand against the Sword of the Spirit. So let's remember that even as the signs of the times bring conflicts and natural disasters and all kinds of persecutions and opposition, we have God's perfect, powerful Word that he will give us opportunities to share – under good circumstances or otherwise – so that more and more may come to know Jesus' love and salvation.

And then finally Jesus says this about the signs of the times: *"You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me."* Betrayal and death – that's enough to scare anybody straight. Everyone will hate us – and we see that more and more already with so many places on earth that aren't friendly to Christianity, to say the least. Never has there been a time in history when more Christians around the world are being killed for their faith than right now. Let that sink in.

But then make sure this sinks in even deeper: *"But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life."* Yes, the signs of the times might mean betrayal and death and hatred, but truly – so what? What's the worst anybody can do to me for my Christian faith – send me home to heaven to be with Jesus? Now I realize that's being just a little flippant, but there's really a lot of truth there. Jesus holds us in his hands and promises that he has every hair on our heads numbered. He promises that nothing can rip us away from him, he knows those who are his, and none of his people will ever be lost. And on top of all that, we are going to rise up again one day to a perfect new

existence with a perfect new body, and neither the devil nor anything else in this world will be able to touch us or do one bit of permanent harm to our souls.

So even in the face of what may seem for all the world to be fearful and horrible and catastrophic, stand firm, dear friends. Remember that even if it seems like you're standing alone, the truth is that Jesus is standing right behind you. And if you're standing with Jesus, that means he will never leave you or forsake you or let anything separate you from his love. If all people will hate us because of Christ, then let's lean on each other that much more and let's cling that much more closely to Christ. We need each other, we need this time gathered together here around God's Word and Sacraments, because here is where we find strength and encouragement to keep our eyes on the prize that Jesus won for us. So let's keep our focus on what really matters, because even as the world comes crashing down around us, Christ is still in control, your eternal life is still assured, and he will still surely deliver us home to heaven.

Yes, I know the signs of the times seem like an awful lot to be afraid of. But Jesus didn't tell us all this to make us shake in our boots. In fact, he told us all this so that we would look forward to what comes later with the most eager anticipation. Just a few verses after this, Jesus said, *"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near"* (21:28).

Friends, if you're worried about the great tribulation at the end of time, remember the even greater deliverance that will come after it. If you're worried about the destruction of this heavens and earth, just think about the new heavens and earth that Jesus is coming to make. If you're worried about your sins and the last judgment, remember that your verdict was already pronounced long ago at Jesus' cross and empty tomb. You are not guilty of all your sins for Jesus' sake – God himself has declared it, and no one and nothing can stand against him.

Yes, the signs of the times may seem scary to us now, but in every case they're just temporary trouble that leads to something so much better eternally. The destruction of the Jerusalem temple gives way to the construction of the Holy Christian Church. Conflicts, natural disasters, and persecutions give us opportunities to testify to God's truth and hope and reach all the Elect for Christ. And betrayal, death, and hatred may be in store for us here, but they lead only to eternal life in heavenly perfection. The signs of the times are really just the death throes of this broken, sinful world that signal the coming of everlasting joy with Jesus in Paradise. So let's not dwell on the negatives; let's focus so much more on the positives, because more than anything the signs of the times mean that one day soon Christ is going to take us and all his people home to heaven forever. God grant it. Amen.