

The Second-last Sunday before Advent, November 14, 2021

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Enduring to the End

Mark 13:1–13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Hear again what Jesus Christ our says in St. Mark's Gospel: **"The one who endures to the end will be saved"** (v 13).

St. Paul described the Christian life as a race, like a marathon. It's long and grueling. It requires self-control and discipline. Simply finishing the race is a win. In his letter to the Corinthians St. Paul urges us on, saying, **"Run that you may obtain [the prize]"** (1 Cor 9:24). Now that's a fine description . . . if you like to run. But for some running sounds like purgatory (or worse). Maybe that's why Jesus described the Christian life in terms understood by both runners and non-runners. He simply says: **"The one who endures to the end will be saved"** (v 13). The Christian life is a test of endurance. Yes, we do **press on toward the goal** (Php 3:14), but we could also say that the goal presses on toward us. The end has us in its sights. It bears down on us, it comes, and we suffer through the signs and birth pangs of its approach.

2.

Jesus tells Peter, James, John, and Andrew what must be endured before the end, what lies in store for them, for you, for the Church and the world in these latter days. Jesus doesn't mince words. It's not a pretty picture. This is what **"must take place"** (v 7): the temple's destruction; the appearance of false Christs; political upheavals; natural disasters; and the persecution of Christians.

Therefore, **see that no one leads you astray** (v 5). The religious world serves as a sign of the end. Jesus said, **"Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and they will lead many astray"** (v 6). It's not enough simply to follow "Jesus," because there are many different Jesuses out there. There's the health-and-wealth Jesus. He promises all sorts of earthly blessings. There's the good-teacher Jesus. He provides an example of how to live a moral life. There's the Jesus of liberation. He comes to free our world from oppressive social structures and to usher in an age of tolerance and enlightenment. Religion today is like a Sunday buffet: you can pick a Jesus to suit your own taste. Don't be deceived by such false Christs and false Christianities, by half-truths. There's only

one Jesus who died on the cross and shed His blood for you, and He's all the Jesus you need now and at the end.

The political world also serves as a sign of the times. Jesus said, **“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. . . . For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom”** (vv 7, 8). It sounds like the nightly world news report or a recap of history from our times: World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the First Gulf War, the War on Terrorism, the War in Afghanistan, not to mention the many wars that have never involved the United States. Such bloodshed will continue until the end of time. There will be no lack trouble.

The natural world is yet another sign. Jesus said, **“There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines”** (v 8). Natural disasters signal the decay and ruin of this world. Hurricanes and floods wreak havoc on the earth. Earthquakes destroy cities and take lives. Diseases and pandemics ravage the earth. You don't need the Bible to recognize the end of the world. November is a month when you can actually see nature dying: night grows long, leaves fall, cold sets in. In Romans, St. Paul says that the whole creation groans under the burden of our sin, waiting to be set free when Christ returns again in glory.

Had enough yet? Jesus doesn't stop there: **“Be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake”** (vv 9–12). Peter, James, John, and Andrew experienced this first hand. So do Christians today in China, North Korea, Iran, Somalia, India, Nigeria, and, yes, even Finland.

All this should sound familiar. You can expect more of the same. That's what Jesus says. He helps us to look at and interpret the world from His perspective. These signs are the groans of a creation subjected to futility. They're the birth pains of a world nearing its end-time delivery. It's a picture of the Church of all times—including today—always threatened by her enemies and even by those who claim to be Christians. We know that our Lord speaks the truth not because of the absence of such things but precisely because we see these signs in our own lives and in our world.

1.

But how can the Church—how can we Christians, endure all this? What do we have to help us through these birth pains—through the deaths, disasters, and hells of our lives?

The Church has this: not just any Jesus, but the Jesus Christ who was and is and always will be; the Jesus who in His own body suffered every punishment for sin, confronted the power of death, and even endured the torment of hell; the Jesus who speaks through the Scriptures, who gives the Holy Spirit in baptism, who offers His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Look to this Jesus, **the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted** (Heb 12:2–3).

This is why Hebrews says that we should **not neglect to meet together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near** (Heb 10:25). In the midst of wars, earthquakes, famines, and persecutions, of death and dying, you need to be where Jesus is. You need to be where His word is preached, where baptisms are done in His name, where absolution is spoken by His authority, where His holy Supper is celebrated . . . you need to be right here. Nothing delights the devil more than to keep you from this place, from these gifts, from Christ Himself.

In Jesus, you have a new and better temple than the Jerusalem temple that so impressed the disciples. The sacrifices of that temple had to be repeated again and again, day after day. Its stones were thrown down by the Roman army less than thirty years after the disciples marveled at it. Jesus, however, is the temple made without hands. By a single sacrifice, offered once for all time—the sacrifice of Himself—He has taken away your sin and gained for you an eternal kingdom. His body, destroyed on the cross and raised up on the third day, is the only temple that offers safety and security in these grey and latter days, in the end times, or at the end of our lives.

And you have something better than the knowledge of when this will take place. More certain and sure than any date for the end of the world is this: Christ's promise, as true and real as the nail marks in his hands, as the water of your baptism, as His true body and blood in this Supper. It's a promise that you can hear and taste. He will come again in glory. **Everyone whose name shall be found written in the book will be delivered** (Dan 12:1). And **many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake**, those who believe to **everlasting life** (Dan 12:2). The one who endures to the end will be

saved. You have His word for it. You have His gifts to sustain you. He is faithful. He will surely do it.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

*Revised from a sermon preached at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana,
for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost on November 15, 2009.*