

**The Second-Last Sunday before Advent, November 17, 2024**

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

## **As the Day Draws Near**

Hebrews 10:11–25

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

*Eph 1:2*

---

**Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (vv 19–25)**

---

It can be unnerving to think about the end times. What will it be like leading up to the Last Day, the Day when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead? We may hear all sorts of things from different Christian churches and speakers about what to expect. To be blunt, many of them are misguided. They distort or misunderstand what the Bible actually teaches, especially when they try to match current events with biblical imagery. For example, don't get drawn into believing in the rapture, or that Jesus will rule an earthly kingdom for a thousand years, or that His return is somehow connected to rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. Those things may sound good, but they're not really in the Bible.

The true timeline is this: Christ already reigns in and through His Church. Already means right now! That's what the thousand-years symbolize in Revelation 20. Near the end, Satan will have his "little season" of trying to deceive the world, including Christians. Then Jesus will return visibly, defeat Satan, raise the dead, and judge all people. Finally, unbelievers will receive the everlasting punishment of hell, while believers will go into everlasting life—the new heavens and the new earth.

### 3.

The "signs" of the end are what often make us nervous. Daniel hears about a **time of trouble** unlike anything that had come before—a time worse than the Assyrian

conquest of Israel or Judah's Babylonian captivity (Daniel 12:1). Jesus says something similar in Mark 13. His "little apocalypse" sermon (Mark 13:1–13) describes the destruction of the Jerusalem temple about take place in AD 70. Then He warns about false Christs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, and famines. **"This must take place,"** He says, **"but the end is not yet. . . . These are but the beginning of the birth pains"** (Mark 13:7b, 8b). His followers will also suffer persecution. All that sounds familiar, doesn't it? How will they survive? It requires endurance.

Let's call this the "perspective from below." It's a picture of what the approach of the Last Day looks like from someone standing on earth. This is what people will experience as that Day gets closer — trouble and distress.

## 2.

But the Book of Hebrews gives us a different perspective. You might call it the "perspective from above." It's how things look as we view them through the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. It's how it looks with Jesus ruling and shepherding His people — us — right now through the Divine Service. The approach of the Last Day appears different when seen from inside the Church — gathered as God's people, His household, around His Holy Word and His Holy Sacraments. We stand at the dawn of a new day. It's like we can see the rays shooting over the horizon and we know that the Day will soon be here with all its glory! Instead of a day of darkness and wrath, the sunrise from on high will visit us!

Our Hebrews reading doesn't focus on the trouble and distress of the end. It focuses on something else: the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Rather than laying an extra weight on our shoulders — rucking toward the end — this gives us a boost, new energy, a lightening of the load. After all, Jesus did say that His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:30), and then He made that yoke easy and He made the burden light by His full, final, sufficient sacrifice for sins. **By a single offering** — His perfect death on the cross — **He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified** (v 14). We are those people — being made holy! Everything is forgiven through grace, even as He still works to remove our sin and drive out the ugly roommate.

This is the new covenant established and sealed by the blood of Jesus. The Holy Spirit dwells in us and writes His law on our hearts and minds. As the Lord promised through the prophet Jeremiah, so He does for us: **"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more"** (v 17 // Jeremiah 31:34), and **where there is forgiveness, there's no longer any offering for sin** (v 18). PAID IN FULL, dear friends! He will

never, never, no-not-ever remember our sins! Not now. Not tomorrow. Not on the Last Day. You already heard it announced in the absolution. You'll taste it soon in the Supper—given and shed for you, why? For the forgiveness of sins. Taste and see that forgiveness. The Lord's Supper isn't another offering for sin. It isn't a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice—that's a false belief of Roman Catholicism. It's the once-for-all sacrifice that was made on the cross now hand delivered to Christ's beloved bride. And know this: If He's not remembering your sins, then there's no reason for you to remember them either. Why hold on to what God has forgiven? Why keep paying when Jesus has already purchased and won you and rose from the dead to prove it?

### 1.

Beloved in the Lord, let us draw near with sincere hearts! That's how we approach the end. Forgiven by Jesus! We stand in the same situation as the people who first heard the letter to the Hebrews. This letter encourages and exhorts us in three ways, saying:

- **let us draw near to our God with a true heart in full assurance of faith** (v 22),
- **let us hold fast the confession of our hope** (v 23), and
- **let us consider how to stir up one another in love and good works** (v 24).

### A.

The forgiveness of sins makes us free. We have the freedom to go boldly and confidently where priests and prophets feared to tread. We're invited, encouraged, even urged to draw near to God, to approach His heavenly throne, to enter the divine council, and to do so without fear. When God gave Israel the tabernacle and then the temple for Old Testament worship, the Most Holy Place could only be entered once a year and then only by the high priest. And that was merely the earthly sanctuary. But following Jesus, through His blood, **we have confidence to enter the holy places** (v 19), the heavenly sanctuary. His flesh—born of Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, risen from death—His flesh provides the way. What He did makes us bold—so bold to approach God's throne, so bold to live as His people here and now and even as the end approaches.

It's our privilege to join Jesus in entering the holiest place. True, we don't deserve it. Our sins should make keep us out, but God has declared us worthy by the blood of Jesus. Instead of shrinking back and falling away, we draw near—Sunday after Sunday, week after week, we draw near again and again to the throne of grace. The point isn't that we feel forgiven. We might, but we might not. What matters is that we are forgiven. It's not that we're self-assured and so confident about our own faith. Our confidence is in Christ and His promises. He's the One who has **sprinkled our hearts clean from an evil conscience** (v 22). He's the One who **washed our bodies with pure water** (v 22).

So we draw near, bringing our needs and our struggles. We bring our prayers and our pleas. We intercede for the church, the world, the sick and needy, and those who've fallen away. We draw near in Holy Communion. How would we dare approach that holy Body and holy Blood, except by His invitation? Our guilt is taken away. We have the antidote to death. And so we're also prepared to draw near when our last hour comes, or when Christ comes in glory.

### B.

Let us draw near *and let us hold fast the confession of our hope* (v 23). Hold fast because our hope rests on a firm foundation. **He who promised is faithful** (v 23). We don't yet see that for which we hope. But we know that God's promises cannot fail. Embrace all the truths of Holy Scripture, but especially the forgiveness found in Christ. Cling to that in every temptation and through any opposition. Jesus is our priceless treasure!

The danger is that we would waver. Those who start to waver in matters of Christian faith and practice are in danger of falling away. We cannot hold fast by ourselves. A lone Christian will quickly become a wavering and doubtful Christian.

What gifts do we have now in part and fully on the Last Day? What hope do we have in Jesus? Hebrews describes these gifts with such beautiful language: rest with God, eternal salvation, eternal redemption, eternal inheritance, remission of sins, life with God, healing, holiness, and access to the heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus is the mediator of these good things, our hope.

### C.

Let us draw near, let us hold fast, and finally **let us consider how to stir up one another in love and good works** (v 24). Why stir one another up? The word really means "provoke." We are to provoke one another—not to anger or frustration but to love and good works! God knows our weakness. He also knows our neighbor's weakness. This is why He's given us to each other. **Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another** (v 25). Some say that the Bible never speaks going to church. What a bunch of baloney! It's right here in Hebrews. And in Acts: "**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**" (Acts 2:42). From the very beginning Christians have gathered on the Lord's day to celebrate His resurrection and receive His gifts. It's so important that we do it every single week—and even more often in Advent and Lent, not to mention Bible studies and fellowship with other Christians.

**Do not neglect** to do this! You do so to your own harm. Already when Hebrews was written, some had the habit of staying away. Maybe it was the pressure of business. Maybe it was the fear of persecution. Maybe it was a conflict with someone else in the congregation. It doesn't really matter. And other accounts of the early Church describe people who formerly called themselves Christians but had turned away from the faith. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

We need the encouragement that comes from being together, **and all the more as you see the Day drawing near** (v 25)! Don't take for granted what you have in Christ, in the Divine Service, in each other. Our souls and bodies need this. You know how easy it is for people to slip away. You've seen it happen. The change comes so gradually, so imperceptibly—a Sunday here, a Sunday there—and then years have gone by. The damage is done before they even realize it. Be faithful, dear Christian, in making regular use of God's Word and the Sacrament—for your own sake and for the sake of your brothers and sisters here.

Let us draw near, hold fast, and stir one another up. See each other with the eyes of love. Place a high value on those around you. The devil takes pleasure in stirring us up to unbelief, despair, and wicked and shameful things. But we fight against the devil with God's Word and by encouraging each other in the Church. Be tenderhearted toward each other. Have concern for one another. Take into account what your brothers and sisters here need, their weaknesses and temptations, not to belittle each other, but so that together we grow in love for God and for each other. We're still sinners. We need one another. We need the encouragement we receive from each other.

**As you see the Day drawing near.** The approach of the Last Day leads us not to complacency or coldness, fear or despair. We have a different perspective. It leads us to seek more Jesus, more forgiveness, more fellowship with other Christians. That's how we prepare for the end—not by hiding alone in a corner, but by gathering together, receiving forgiveness, singing hymns to Jesus Christ as God, and boldly asking our dear Father in heaven to grant us His grace and help us endure to the end. This is why we're here—to keep us ready for the end, ready to meet the new day at peace, with joy, and together.

---

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

*Phil 4:7*

---