

*But in those days, following that distress,
 “ the sun will be darkened,
 and the moon will not give its light;
 25 the stars will fall from the sky,
 and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’*

26 “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27 And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. (Mark 13:24-27)

It’s Over!

“It’s over.” That might be one of the most frequently written lines for a TV show – at least in recent years. Whenever the girl is rescued or the psycho is caught or the gunfight is done, someone calms someone else by whispering, “It’s over.” Of course the message is that now that the nightmare, the drama, the conflict is over, you can have some measure of peace. It’s overused on TV, but coming to the end of a difficult situation is a wonderful thing. Today, Jesus points us to a time when the real nightmare is over. He was sitting with his disciples painting a picture of the future. What he said stirred up their emotions. Indeed for two thousand years, what he described has caused anxiety among Christians. But he didn’t leave us in the anxiety. If he had been making a movie, the background music and the lighting would have changed and become lighter and more hopeful when he said these words because at the end of the fear and drama of this world, **it’s over.**

I.

What Jesus describes will not happen until the last day of this world’s existence dawns. In some ways, the Bible’s descriptions of the end leave us with more questions. We can’t easily understand something that hasn’t happened yet. But what Jesus says about that end today is striking. He uses language that Isaiah originally used and he says, **“The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”**

Now, obviously that’s very poetic. But what does it mean? “The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.” They will cease to function. It’s hard to imagine the sun without light, isn’t it? When I was kid, I was interested in astronomy and I remember how many times I heard the warning, “Never look at the sun through a telescope.” It’s so bright that if you concentrate the rays, they’ll blind you. But Jesus speaks of a day when the sun won’t shine anymore. He speaks of a day when the moon has no light to reflect back to this earth. And on that day, the stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

God often describes Judgment Day like this. In our modern, scientific age, this language should reach out and grab us even more than it did when Jesus spoke these words. His disciples had no understanding of what the sun really was or how the moon worked. They knew nothing of planets and stars. They only saw lights in the sky. We know much more about the way God designed the universe. All that we know should make these words that much more dramatic because there’s nothing on this planet that can affect the light of the sun or moon. This planet could blow up and scientifically speaking, the sun would keep shining and the moon would still reflect its light. If nothing that happens here can affect the light of the sun, certainly there’s nothing that can affect the planets and the stars. No shock wave from this planet could jump the void of space and reach Mars or Jupiter, let alone stars that sit millions of light years from earth.

Jesus is speaking poetically. But what he says is true. All that he says here will happen on Judgment Day. The world as we know it will end – not because of anything we do down here, but because God will shake the heavens and the earth. God will end the order of things that we have seen all our lives. Whatever else is true about the sun, moon and stars, God set them in place for a purpose: to give light to the earth and to measure days and seasons and years, as Moses tells us in the first chapter of the Bible. God made the universe. The day is coming when he will unmake the world, at least as we know it. The cosmos will come to an end and there will be a new heavens and a new earth. While we can’t understand all that that means, stopping and thinking about the vastness of the universe that God made only increases our wonder at what he has planned and our amazement over the fact that he’s going to do all that for us. When that day arrives, **it’s over. The world we know is over.**

II.

But what difference does it make to us today? The meaning of all this is found in the very first words that we quoted from Jesus today. He said, **“But in those days, following that distress”** the sun and moon would be darkened and the stars would fall. What are “those days”? What is “that distress” that he was speaking of? The agony of the end times. That’s what Jesus was talking about in this chapter. It was Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus knew that in just three days, he was going to die on the cross. And he wanted to teach his disciples what that death would mean.

Jesus’ death and the end times are inseparable. So he spoke of wars and rumors of wars, of earthquakes and famines and disasters. He spoke of persecution and betrayal for the church and of armies surrounding Jerusalem and leveling the city. He spoke of things that still cause us to tremble today because who wants to live through a time like that? Then Jesus said, **“But in those days, following that distress”** these other things would happen. That changes how we see these signs. How do you think you would feel if suddenly the sun stopped shining? How would you feel if the stars were falling? Don’t you think that you would be afraid? I do. I think we’d be terrified. But Jesus says that all these will happen after the distress of the end times. These signs are not the cause of fear. They are the answer to our fear.

The real fear and anxiety comes from all that stuff that happens before these signs – the wars and famines and persecutions. And if you stop and think about it, all those things that Jesus warned us about have been happening all our lives. Sometimes, we have the idea that the end times are some future era that hasn’t come yet. But that’s not true. The end times began when Jesus ascended into heaven. They will continue until he returns. Now, it is true that the Bible pictures the world getting worse and worse. But it’s not a steady downward decline. It’s not a nosedive. It’s more a downward spiral in which there are times that are better. And then there are those horrible times when destruction and death are all around us.

Jesus is talking about our lives, here and now, today. We live in the end times. Clearly, things could be worse for us. We don’t live in Germany during World War II. We live in America in 2009 and that means that we have all kinds of blessings and creature comforts. Not one of us has to live in a house without electricity or plumbing or central heating. We all have treasured possessions and activities and people. But alongside the blessings, there are curses because we live in a world full of sin.

Jesus spoke of people fainting from fear and anxiety in these last days. How do you feel about life here in Michigan today? Did you read about that report that came out this week that said that Michigan is one of the poorest states in the union now and that it’s one of ten states poised to follow California into economic ruin? How did that make you feel? How do you feel about your job security? Does your house payment keep you up at night because even if you could sell your house, you wouldn’t get enough to pay off the loan? How do you feel about your kids? Do you worry that we’ve failed as a generation because we’ve given our kids everything and we haven’t made them work for anything? Do you worry that all they see on TV is people jumping in and out bed with each other and that maybe, they’ll follow the fantasies Hollywood constantly feeds them? Do you worry that they face so many more challenges to their faith than we did and that if this country continues to race down the road it’s on, there will be no Christians left?

Welcome to the end times! These times are full of stress and anxiety because these times are full of sin. Sin always has painful consequences – often, the pain is greater for believers than for unbelievers. Until Jesus comes back, the devil never stops waging war against our faith. He uses spiritual things against us: temptation, doubt, lies. But he also uses physical pain against us. He uses our own emotions against us. He uses the evil hearts that we were born with and the love that we have for our children and the dangers that lurk all around us to create anxiety and stress in our hearts in an attempt to get us to question and doubt God. He never stops grinding us down. That’s the way the end times will be from start to finish, whether we’re on an “up” spiral or a “down.”

But after that distress, the sun will be darkened and the moon will no longer give its light. The stars will fall and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. And all this distress will be over. Jesus said, **“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”** Right now, Jesus rules the world. But nobody can see it. When I was in the army, I was talking to a friend who was a Christian. I said to him, “Jesus is ruling right now.” You know what he answered? “Well, he isn’t doing a very good job.” I understand why he felt that way. Jesus’ rule is hidden. He hides himself behind doctors and

our jobs and farmers and he provides for all our needs. And Jesus hides behind pain and war and upheaval. He even hides behind the devil's attacks on us. He hides behind all the anxiety and fear of these end times and he works through all of them. Every time the devil attacks us and tries to drive us into hell, Jesus uses that trial to strengthen our faith. But it still hurts. That pain hides the work of Christ. When he returns, the hurt will be over. Jesus will come out into the open and to rule forever.

He will send his angels into all the world to gather us in – to rescue us from the hurt we've faced all our lives. Last week, I saw a documentary about American airmen who were shot down over Borneo during World War II. They had to hide for months in the jungle. Every one of them lost at least thirty pounds because food was scarce. But they kept waiting to be rescued. Well, we're all stuck here, behind enemy lines. And it's hard. But the Son of Man will come with great power and glory and he will send his angels out to rescue us. And they will find every single one of us because Jesus already knows exactly where we are. He knows us by name. When he returns we will live with him. My friends, when he returns we win. The war is over and all that follows is an eternity of celebration.

How do we know he's coming? Jesus promised all this just days before he let Jewish temple guards arrest him and bind him and mock him, just days before he let Jewish leaders slap him and convict him in a kangaroo court, just days before he let Pilate wash his hands and Roman soldiers shove a crown of thorns on his head and scourge him and nail him to a cross. None of that was the worst. The worst was hell. On the cross, God the Father abandoned Jesus to hell. Jesus stepped up and suffered all that for us. He suffered all we have coming because we're sinners. He paid for all the sin that makes this life so painful. He let it all fall on his head.

On Tuesday of Holy Week, Jesus knew all that was coming. In the shadow of the cross, he promised to come back and set us free from all the pain and sorrow of this life. Then he kept the earlier promise that he had made over and over again: to die for us and to rise for us. He will keep the promise to come back for us. On that day, **it's over. The evil of this sinful world is over.**

That is something to look forward to. Today is the second last Sunday of the church year. It's called Saints Triumphant because it's all about the victory we will enjoy. Jesus already won that victory. He beat the devil. He paid for our sin. He crushed death when he rose. All we're waiting for is the victory celebration. All we're waiting for is the day when Jesus forces his enemies to celebrate his victory, too. When he comes, it's over. And a new and better life begins. Amen.