

“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” We'll say these words as a congregation later in the service. And, until fairly recently, they may not have been words that were especially familiar to you. Only in 2006, with the Lutheran Service Book, did we add this verse to the communion liturgy of Divine Service Setting One.

And I'm glad that we did. I'm glad because they're the very last words of the Bible. I'm glad because they're the English translation of the word “Maranatha” that you may have heard before. But I'm glad most of all because this is the core prayer of the Church. Every single prayer that every Christian makes flows out of this central plea: Come, Lord Jesus.

Maybe you've never thought of that, but it's true. We don't do anything in this life for its own sake. We do all of it in preparation for the return of Jesus Christ. That's the meaning of life. That's the purpose for our existence.

Jesus tells parable after parable after parable about this. And they all look alike. He begins them by saying, “The Kingdom of God is like...” And then he tells a story about a master who goes away. The master's servants do something, good or bad. And then the master returns and judges the servants' actions.

Why does he tell this parable over and over again? Because that's what life in the Kingdom of God is like. Our master has gone away. He has ascended into heaven, as we also heard today. But he is coming back. And everything we do as the master's servants will define what the master finds and how he reacts when he returns.

“Come, Lord Jesus,” is our life and breath. It is possibly the most important prayer we say. Everything else that we pray should be done in light of that prayer. And yet, aside from this recently addition to the liturgy, it's a prayer that we don't often say. And in fact, it's a prayer that we sometimes don't want to say.

I've found this to be true very often in youth confirmation class. Because I will talk about the end of the world and the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. And quite often – almost every class, I think – somebody will say, “I hope Jesus doesn't come back soon.”

And I will ask them why. And invariably they will say, “Because I don't want the world to end. Not yet. I want to grow up and have fun and experience all sorts of new things. And then, maybe, I'd like Jesus to return.”

In a way, it's an understandable reaction. When we hear about the return of Christ, we tend to think about it as meaning our death. That when Christ returns, he will take us to heaven. Which will be great and all, but it won't be... life. It won't be like it is on earth. And we will miss out on so much as a result.

Now, here's the thing. That view of life and death and the end times is both completely accurate and completely wrong, at the same time. It seems impossible, but it's true.

Here's where it's correct. Life in heaven is not like life on earth. That is accurate. And life in heaven is missing something. That's true too. Heaven is wonderful. It is a great place. Don't get me wrong. Your loved ones in heaven are in the arms of God. That is a wonderful place to be. Far better than this sinful earth, that's for sure.

But, at the same time, we weren't meant to spend eternity in heaven. We were meant to spend eternity on earth. That's the way God designed things in the beginning. God gave us these bodies and this earth for a reason. He called this creation and our place in it “good” for a reason.

And, deep down, we know that. It's what makes confirmands feel uneasy about dying. It's what makes us all feel a little uneasy about dying. You can have complete faith in Jesus Christ and His saving work and still not be terribly fond of the thought of dying. Because it still means giving up this physical life that you were meant to have.

But here's where that view goes wrong: the return of Jesus does not mean that we die. Quite the opposite actually. It means that we live. Live in a way that we've never dreamed of before.

That's what St John's Revelation is getting at in our lesson today. We begin this lesson with some fairly familiar images. Images of flowing water and of life giving trees.

Now, these two things are really, really common in the Bible. We hear about rivers of water and trees of life given to us by God in Ezekiel and Zechariah and Isaiah and Joel and from Jesus' own mouth in the Gospels.

But all of these are really pointing back to the very first time we hear about them. All the way back in Genesis 2. With the description of the Garden of Eden. Which had a river flowing through the midst of it to water the entire garden. And a Tree of Life given to Adam and Eve so that they might live eternally in that garden.

And so what John sees is the restoration of Eden. But unlike the first Eden that humanity was banished from and barred from re-entering by an angel and a flaming sword, this Eden is open to us.

You see, John says that no longer will anything be accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him there. We were thrown out of Eden because we were cursed. Cursed with death. But by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that curse has been lifted. And when Jesus returns, Eden will be made new and it will be open to us once again.

We will be in paradise in the very presence of God, the way we were always supposed to be. And just as the first Adam went to every creature and placed a name on it, so also the second Adam will go to each of us and write his name on our foreheads. And there will be no more night, for God himself will be our sun and moon and stars for all eternity.

That is what John calls the recompense of Jesus for his people. Which is a really fancy way of saying his reward given to us. It's not our reward. In our sinfulness, we haven't won a single thing. Jesus won the reward by his work on the cross. But he chooses to give to us his reward at the end.

He is the alpha and omega, the first and last, the beginning and end. He has all time and all creation given to him by God the Father as His reward. And he chooses to give it to us. All those whose robes have been washed in his blood. All those Baptized in his name.

We have access once again to the tree of life and may enter this holy city. This new Jerusalem. This new Eden. This holy Christian Church. Created for us.

And so, you see, looking at the return of Christ like it means our death is absurd. The return of Christ means our life. Life for the entire world. Life beyond what we have ever experienced.

Because every moment of our lives in this mortal life is tainted with death. We've never experienced physical life that doesn't end, without even the fear of it ending. We've never experienced what Adam and Eve experienced in Eden.

The resurrection isn't what we have now. It's better, because there is no sin or death. But yet, the resurrection also isn't heaven. It's better, because it will be in the physical bodies and on the physical earth that we were always supposed to have. Imagine everything you have ever known. And now imagine in it better. That's the resurrection in a nutshell.

It's no wonder that everyone who sees this new life, from the Spirit of God to His bride the Church to the sinner who hears about it for the first time, everyone who sees it can't help but cry out, "Come." Everyone, come with me. Come with Christ. Come to the river of life. Come to the tree of life. Come to the throne of God. Come to this life that never ends. Come and see the goodness of God for His people.

In these last verses of the Bible, so important that John warns everyone not to change one word of them, we hear the reason for our existence. And it is to say, "Come." Come, because the master is returning soon. Come, all who are thirsty and drink the water without price. Come, Lord Jesus, and give us this water always.

That's what we do as the Church. We reach out to the world and we say, "Come and see." We reach up to heaven and we say, "Come, Lord Jesus." And through it all we cling to the promise of Jesus. And take hope that surely, He is coming soon. Amen.