

December 3, 2023 – Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

Christians are fascinated by the end times. It's pretty much universal. I suppose it makes sense. Everybody loves a mystery. And when Jesus says something like what does in our Gospel lesson – that no one knows the day or the hour, not the angels in heaven, not even the Son, but only the Father – well, that's certainly quite the mystery for us.

On top of that, the end times are often discussed with some pretty bizarre imagery. Beasts and dragons and wars. Fire and disaster consuming all of creation. Or what Jesus says today: the sun and moon going dark and the stars falling from the heavens. These are dramatic, mind-blowing scenes that ignite the imagination.

So our fascination is understandable. And, in many ways, good and healthy for us spiritually. After all, Jesus talks a lot about the end times, just like he does today. Likewise, the prophets talk about the end times, like Isaiah does in our Old Testament reading. God clearly wants us thinking about Christ's return.

And so God's people always have. We hear from the prophet Amos about the Israelites seeking the day of the Lord, but not really knowing what they're seeking. We hear Jesus' disciples in the Gospels asking about when Jesus will come into his kingdom. The Thessalonians were absolutely obsessed with the end times, if St Paul's letters to them are any indication.

And that hasn't changed in the centuries since. As the church neared the 1000 year anniversary of Christ's ascension, many in the middle ages were fully expecting Christ to return any day. Five hundred years later, Luther and many of his fellow reformers were all but convinced that the Reformation was a sign of the end times. And five hundred years after that, we are just as surrounded by theologians preaching about the last days.

So it should come as no surprise to us that Paul remarks during our Epistle lesson that the Corinthians are waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what Christians do. What all God's people do, of every time and place. Like St John at the end of the Revelation, we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus." And then we wait for him to be revealed. Perfectly normal.

What's a little odd about this sentiment is how the Corinthians are waiting for Jesus to be revealed. What they're doing while they wait. Because you would think that a person waiting for Jesus to return would want to be ready for Jesus' return.

That's really kinda the whole point of Jesus' end times prophecies. It's not about being curious about the mysteries of the end times. Or fascinated by all the bizarre, apocalyptic images. Those things may be interesting, but they completely miss the point.

The point is to be ready. There is an end coming. An end to suffering. An end to creation. An end to all things. When the Son of Man will come on the clouds with great power and glory. And all God's people will be gathered from the ends of the earth. It's coming.

So be ready. See the signs of the end like the signs of seasons changing. I that mentioned that same analogy during my children's message a couple weeks ago. The winter will not last forever. The branches are already putting out leaves. Jesus, the first fruits of a resurrection harvest, has already risen from the dead. He is at the gate, ready to return any day now.

So be ready. Stay awake. It could happen any time. You don't want to be asleep when he returns. You don't want to have forgotten what it means to be Jesus' disciple when he shows up on the last day. Do what he has commanded. Stay awake. Be ready.

But the Corinthians don't look like they're very ready. They don't look very ready at all. The church at Corinth has problems. It has issues. Serious issues.

They're arguing over who's baptism is better. As if Peter's baptism does a better job of saving you than Paul's baptism does. They have no concept of what baptism is or why we do it.

They're tolerating some pretty disturbing sins in their membership. There's a man in their congregation who is having an affair with his step-mother. And everybody knows about it and no one cares. The pagans don't even tolerate that kind of sexual immorality, according to Paul. But the Corinthians don't seem to have any problem with it.

They have zero respect for the Lord's Supper. None. It's just an ordinary meal for them. They treat it so casually that they actually stuff themselves with it. The people who show up at the beginning of the Supper eat and drink so much that they don't leave any for the people who show up later.

They don't recognize the Body and Blood of Christ. They don't confess their sins before they eat. They don't even remember the Words of Institution. Paul explained every bit of this to them in detail when he was in Corinth the first time, but they've forgotten so much of it that he has to teach it to them all over again.

The Corinthians are a mess. They are a train-wreck of a congregation. But for some reason, they are eagerly waiting for Jesus to return. Now, if I were there, I might be tempted to tell them to pump the brakes on those "Come, Lord Jesus" prayers. Cause you got some work to do before you want him showing up.

But I would be wrong to do that. Because Paul doesn't, and he's a lot smarter than I am. In fact, Paul does the opposite. He encourages them to wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He calls it a spiritual gift that they are waiting for Jesus' return. And he has no concerns at all about the problems in their congregation.

Well... that's not true. Paul has lots of concerns about the problems in their congregation. And he has some really scathing criticism and correction and exhortation throughout his letter. But he's not worried about their salvation. He's not worried about what Christ will find when he comes back.

In fact, he says that Christ will sustain them to the end and that they will be "*guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus.*" Guiltless?! The Corinthians?! Yes, the Corinthians. Because although the Corinthians are sinful and forgetful and stubborn, "*God is faithful.*" And it was God who called them "*into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

You see, Paul knew that being ready and awake for Jesus' return is not about being perfect. If it were, then we should all be terrified and none of us should be praying "Come, Lord Jesus." If being ready and awake for Jesus' return meant being a perfect Christian in a perfect church, then we're all doomed and the day of the Lord is nothing but darkness for us.

But that's not what being ready and awake is all about. It's instead what Isaiah describes in our Old Testament lesson. Here we have Isaiah giving yet another of those wonderfully vivid descriptions of the end times. God rending the heavens open. The mountains quaking at his presence.

And who will God find when he comes down? A bunch of really sinful people who deserve his anger. People are unclean, like a polluted garment. People who are carried away by their sinfulness like a leaf on the wind. People who do not call on God's name like they should.

People like the Corinthians. People like... us. Sinful people. Worshipping together in churches full of other sinful people. That occasionally get to the point that they become a complete train-wreck and require the correction of godly men like St Paul.

And yet, God is faithful. They are still God's people. We are still God's people. He called us into fellowship with his son. We are the clay, he is the potter. We are all the work of his hands.

And if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteous. If we pray, "*Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever.*" He will look down upon us and continue to behold his people.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians and pointed out all these many errors in their church, he didn't do it to condemn them. To drive them into despair. To make them lose their faith.

He did it because he knew that if they were confronted with their sins, they would repent. And so he was absolutely correct to say that they would be "*guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Because when you are God redeemed people, when you are the work of his hands, you are guiltless.

And so you have nothing to fear from the end times. You can pray with absolute hope and joy like Isaiah, "*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.*" For Christ your savior has already come down. And by his blood, shed on the cross, he has brought into his fellowship.

And when he says to you, "Be ready. Stay awake." It is a call to repentance. It is a call to daily cast your sin upon him. It is a call to drown the Old Adam in the waters of your baptism, so that a new man, the work of God himself, may rise up.

Be ready. Stay awake. Don't fall asleep in your sin, unconcerned with God's judgement. But be alert and waiting for Christ's return with gratitude and joy. For when he comes again, this sinful flesh will be no more. And all will be made new. Amen.