

Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 21, 2021

Isaiah 51:4-6:

## **“This Journey to the End”**

- I. To the End of Arrogance.
- II. A Journey that Wears Away.
- III. A Journey that Gives Victory.

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Dear Friends in Christ,

I believe I can say that none of us like what has happened to this country. It grieves us to experience full blown determination to call evil "good" and good "evil". But, then again, Jesus said, as we move to The Last Day, "lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold." (Mt. 24:12) He said, "there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world..." (Mt. 24:21) He said, "...on earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves (that is, the strife and turmoil of humanity), people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken." (Lk. 21:25b-26)

Martin Franzmann, who wrote our sermon hymn, *Thy Strong Word*, wrote of the Lord, "He sits enthroned over all the future of men, and in his hand is the book wherein the destinies of men are written. He knows those who are His own...and the prospect of their imperiled future need hold no endless terrors for them." (Martin H. Franzmann, *The Revelation to John*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo., 1968, p. 32)

The fact that the Lord knows who are His own make Franzmann's words worth repeating: *the prospect of (our) imperiled future (in this world) need hold no endless terrors for (us)*. More importantly, they point us to Jesus' words of encouragement: "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Lk. 21:28)

This last day of the church year calls us to think on . . .

### THIS JOURNEY TO THE END

#### I. To the End of Arrogance.

I would guess that some of you are familiar with William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*. The word is Latin for "unconquered". It made an appearance here some years ago. I want to repeat for this day:

1-Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

3-Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the horror of the shade,  
And the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

2-In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud,  
Under the bludgeoning of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

4-It matters not how straight the gate,  
How charged with punishment the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.

Even when I was an unbeliever, I found that poem conflicting. As a believer I find it absurd. "It matters not how straight the gate..." The narrow path is of no concern. "How charged with punishment the scroll." Never mind what I deserve. "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." Not really, and that is especially true when the heart stops beating.

Many of you will remember Timothy McVeigh who was responsible for the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 people and injured hundreds. He left behind a copy of *Invictus*, then was marched to his execution. Unconquerable? Absurd! I was once again reminded of the words of Taylor Caldwell: "Sad little man, strutting on his dung-heap and crowing defiantly at the Sun as it rises...often believing that without his crow the sun would not come up at all."

That's the way it is, isn't it? By nature, we think that we are the masters of our fate; the captains of our souls. It might seem that way until the tornado cuts its path, the fall breaks a bone, the pandemic throws everything into doubt and fear, or the diagnosis opens the way to the funeral home. We're not even the masters of a moment. We are captains of nothing. And this Word of God is of no significance

to most: "Behold, all souls are mine..." (Ez. 18:4a) Everyone will stand face to face with the One who owns all things. Arrogance dies!

## II. A Journey that Wears Away.

Our text reminds us that *This Journey To The End* wears out everything: "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and they who dwell in it will die in like manner..." (Is. 51:6a)

Most think it's all going to last forever, don't they? It's just going to go on and on. Business as usual. Jesus said, "For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." (Mt. 24:37-39)

As quickly as this church year has passed - 12 months - we have been slapped with change and uncertainty. As God says in our text: "the earth will wear out like a garment and they who dwell in it will die in like manner." Nothing lasts forever. Nothing of this world is fixed. Nothing, except God's Final Judgement! I have to repeat this insight of British New Testament theologian, Donald Guthrie:

This world often seems like a rock at sea on which, eager to escape the jaws of death, more drowning people seek standing room than it offers. And when the few who have risen on the shoulders of the many who sink have gained for themselves the wealth or power or pleasure they desire, they have only reached an unsheltered, slippery rock, from which the giant wave of death presently sweeps them to their doom.

And it's *The Parable of the Rich Fool* that should pierce our consciences. The man who had everything of this world - a success story. And then the kiss of death: "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'" (Lk. 12:20) What is driving our most committed labor and wants? What is driving our children? Think about it. We must think about it!

## III. A Journey that Gives Victory!

Our text for this morning closes with God's promise that can never be made by this world and the grave: "...but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed." That salvation and righteousness have been given to us in Christ.

Dear friends, this Word of God must be understood:

But now the righteousness of God (the perfect obedience God demands from each person) has been manifested apart from the law (apart from doing perfectly what God demands, which we cannot do), although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it - the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified (pronounced "not guilty") by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (His redeeming us, buying us back from death and hell), whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood (put forward to be the gift that earned God's favor), to be received by faith. (Rom 3:21-25a)

No, there is nothing here, or anywhere in Scripture promising a heaven on earth; promising that fallen man will finally get his act together and end life's ups and downs, and death. *This journey to The End* is mostly over. The endless love, forgiveness and comfort God gives through Christ are already with

us. They are there in the Word teaching, guiding and comforting us in Christ. They are there in our Baptisms reminding us that our sins have been washed away and God has marked us as His own. They are there in the Supper feeding us forgiveness of sin; feeding us pardon and peace; pointing us to the eternal feast.

In a sense, *The End* has already come for us. The end of guilt and condemnation. The end of fear of the grave. Remember this from the Holy Spirit: "For you have died, and your life (the eternal won for you and me) is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." (Col 3:3-4) And remember this: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." (1 Jn. 3:2)

*This Journey to the End?* Of course. Finally, and thankfully, the end of this world's long span of agonizing demands that God should be what this world wants. The end of its arrogance - its vulgarity - its violence - its corruption - its torture - its torment.

I can't think of a better ending to this sermon than John's words: "Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all! Amen."

Pastor Bill Abbott