

Populus Zion, the Second Sunday in Advent, A²D 2010

Luke 21:25-36

In the name of the Father and of the ☐ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 In the last mile of a marathon, the runners pick up a little speed. They keep their eyes ahead, looking for the first signs of the finish, while their ears drink in the nearly-intoxicating cheers of the crowds that grow bigger as the finish line approaches. Crossing the finish, nearly every runner is smiling. Twenty-six miles earlier and for most of the time in-between, they wondered if this moment would ever come: the finish. But now that it is here, the pain and suffering of the last three, four, or five hours seems to vanish into ancient history. The markers along the way have pointed to this moment, this place, signaling the end of the suffering, the end of the agony, the end of the long, lonely miles. As the numbers grow higher and higher, the hope grows sharper.

2 In His Olivet sermon, just before today's Gospel reading, Jesus told His apostles, "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives" (16-19). The Christian life is a marathon, a grueling race that demands endurance. Jesus warned his disciples, those who followed Him, who were taught by Him, that they would be hated for His name's sake. Those who bear His name today have similar fates. The world hates you because you are a Christian, even when that hatred is couched in friendlier terms. Later in His sermon on the Mount of Olives, as we heard in today's Gospel reading, Jesus preached to the crowd, "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world... Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

3 When you see these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. The Day of Christ's return is not a day for you to fear. It is the Day for which the Church longs and prays. When the buds begin to show on the trees, you know that winter is soon to be cast aside, and spring will break forth. The buds grow and the twigs ripen to green again. The dead of winter will eventually give way to the new life of spring. Life is coming. Death will pass away. Straighten up and raise your heads. The mile markers are counting up. The finish line is near.

4 And yet, there is a strong warning in the text. "Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." The prophet Malachi warns that the arrogant and evil doers will be stubble, that the wicked will be set ablaze. There are many for whom the Day of the Lord's return is not good news at all. Those who have given in to the cares of life, who prefer the comforts and pleasures of the world now to the comfort and pleasure the Lord has promised in the future for those who belong to Him, will find that Day hopeless. Those who love their sins will find that Day a terrible day, while those

who long to be free from their sins will on that Day at last have relief and full deliverance from the sins that still ensnare.

5 Advent gives you hope for today. Raise your head. Straighten up. The finish line is just ahead. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb 12:1-3). Jesus endured the humiliating shame of crucifixion for you, beloved. The joy set before Him, for which He endured the cross, is eternal union with you.

6 There is your hope. Jesus endured for you. Before He will come at the finish line to welcome His Church, He came to endure in her place the payment for her sins. You are not running to win the prize of salvation. You are running this Christian life because the prize is already yours.

7 In this life of struggle, never a day goes by when our hearts are not weighed down with the cares of this life. Our hearts are constantly divided. On one hand they long for the Day of Christ's return; on the other, they don't want the worthless things of this broken world to end. What will preserve us from the cares of this life? What will preserve us until the end of this world and the beginning of the Life to come? Jesus will. With His Word. He endured the cross for you, and by His Word and Spirit, He gives you endurance until the end. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." St Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:4-6). Jesus gives you endurance in His Word and in His Church, in the company of fellow Christians, fellow hearers of the Word of God.

8 Your long suffering does not go unnoticed by your Lord. There is hope. Your race is almost over. The end of this suffering, the Day of His return is drawing near. Lift up your heads and straighten up as a runner nearing the finish line. The crowds of saints swell around you to cheer you on. The whole company of heaven gathers around the Lord's Altar, around the Body and Blood of Him. Their great hymn of praise grows louder and louder each advent, as the Day of Christ's return grows ever nearer. They endured. And when Jesus puts His immortal flesh and blood into your mortal flesh and blood at His Supper, He gives you His own endurance. Lift up your heads and straighten up. The Day of your redemption is nearer now than ever before.

In the name of the Father and of the ☐ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer