**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost
November 17, 2019
Luke 21: 5-28**

 I don’t know about you, but I am totally not ready for another election cycle. My eyes are already beginning to glaze over from listening to all the “*smarter-than-thou”* pundits on television and radio who can’t seem to talk about anything else . . . except maybe impeachment. Already I find myself not caring who is polling ahead of who and who is the front runner at least for this moment in time. The election is a whole year away and I already am suffering from election fatigue.

 And you know, it is only going to get worse as politician after politician stands before a microphone and does what politicians seem to do best. Now, I know when I say that you immediately thought, *“Oh, I know what that is. What politicians do best is lie!”* While there is certainly truth to that, that is not what I was going to say. In my opinion, what they do best is *“obfuscate.”*

Have you ever noticed a politician’s inability to give a straight answer to just about any question? I am sure you have noticed this and, to be honest, personally, this drives me nuts! Watching a debate or an interview becomes an exercise in me yelling at the television saying, “*Answer the darn question!”* But, nope! No answer. Politicians are great at what they euphemistically call, *“pivoting”* to avoid actually giving an answer. A question is asked about, oh…let’s say about the economy and what they would do to improve it. And the answer sounds something like this, *“That is an excellent questions, Bob, and the economy is certainly an important topic to discuss. So let me begin by talking about how my opponent hates children and puppies!”* Try as the moderator or interviewer might, they can’t get a straight answer.

 Now I am a pretty easy-going sort of guy. As long as I get at least six hours of sleep, have at least one good cup of coffee in the morning . . . ok…maybe 4 or five cups . . . and never have to watch an episode of either the Bachelor or the Bachelorette, I am pretty happy. But, when a direct question is asked, I want a direct answer. Don’t obfuscate. Don’t dodge. And don’t make me try and decipher some cryptic reply to figure out the answer. Give me a “*yes”* if the answer is *“yes”* and a “*no”* if the answer is “*no.”* I don’t think that is too much to ask.

 And this is particularly true with subject matters that are of great importance and, if I am honest, that is why I find our reading from St. Luke for today particularly disturbing. Without a doubt, it deals with a mater of great importance: judgement day! Jesus speaks of the time leading up to the final judgment of all people and believe me there is no more important topic than this. Someday, Jesus will return and you and I and all people will stand before the Judge of the Universe. Now, I am not trying to scare you, but you will someday stand before God. Those are just the facts of the matter and I don’t know about you, but I would like to be prepared. Consequently, I would like to know exactly when this is going to happen. Wouldn’t you? Of course you would and so did the disciples in our text for today when they asked Jesus for the sign to let them know when the end was coming.

 You see, this whole conversation with Jesus about the final judgment begins as they left the temple and some unnamed disciple marveled at the beautiful structure. Jesus tells them that as magnificent a structure as the structure was, it would not stand. It would be destroyed and this would be a clear sign of God’s judgement against his disobedient and sinful people.

 Catching on that Jesus was speaking about God’s judgment, the disciple asked what really was a very direct question, *“Teacher, when will these things be and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?”* Now, take note because the question really is very specific. Jesus had just mentioned God’s impending judgment and they asked Jesus what would be *“the”* sign to let them know when this was going to happen. What was *“the”* thing they would have to look for? What was *“the”* event that would happen to let them know the time was now?

 However, Jesus pivots a bit. He doesn’t give them a direct answer. In fact, it seems that Jesus is being anything but direct. They ask for *“the”* sign and Jesus gives them a whole laundry list of signs!

 He warns them against being led astray by false teachers and false-christs. Many will come in his name saying, *“I am he!”* Jesus cautions his followers that impostors will show up claiming to Christ himself but they will bring with them not a message of salvation but of death. Don’t follow them, Jesus warns. Your life depends on it!

 However, false-christs are not the only sign. Listen for talk of wars and rumors of wars. Nations will rise against nations in battle. Wars will flourish throughout the world leaving with them a wake of both death and destruction. There will be great earthquakes and famines and pestilence bringing catastrophe and devastation to people around the world. Even the heavens will yield terrifying signs, the specifics of which, Jesus does not say and, to honest, I don’t want to know!

 Worse, those who are followers of Christs, Christians, you and me, will be persecuted. People will hate the followers of Jesus. Governments, the supposed protector of our rights, will join in the persecution. Even your family, your parents and brothers and all your relatives will persecute you with some actually putting you death for your faith in Jesus.

 Jerusalem will be destroyed. There will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars. Nations will be in distress and people will faint with fear and with foreboding of what is coming in the world.

 Yikes!!! The disciples didn’t ask for *“a”* sign, for *“the”* sign. What does Jesus give them? A deluge of signs none of which, when you think about it, are particularly appealing and, in truth, none of which are particularly helpful in predicting the end times.

 Now, why do I say that? Well, take a look at the list. When was there ever a time, or, when was there ever a generation of believers, that did not see the things about which Jesus speaks? Within 13 years of Jesus’ resurrection, a man named Theudas claimed to be the Messiah and led a revolt against Rome. He died in his attempts but about every one hundred years or so since a new false-christ has come around. Both Jim Jones from Guiana and David Koresh of the Branch Davidians claimed to be Christ. Even right now, there is a pastor of a church in Miami, a Reverend Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda of the Government of God on Earth church who claims to be Jesus incarnate and has a slew of devoted followers. If false-christs pop up on the historical radar pretty often, how is that at all a helpful sign? Which one of these guys is *“the”* sign?

 And, if that was not bad enough, think also of the wars and rumors of wars. Again, has there ever been a time in history when one nation wasn’t rising against another? Which war of the thousands of wars marking history do you pick as *“the”* sign? And what of earthquakes and pestilence? These too can be found throughout history. Ever heard of the Zika virus and mosquitoes? And what about the persecution of Christians. Just read through the Book of Acts and you will see how quickly persecution reared its ugly head against the followers of Jesus and more Christians have been martyred in the 20th and 21st Centuries than the entire 2000 years before.

 In reality, none of this is all that helpful if you are looking for “*the”* sign. Jesus was asked a direction question, *“What will be ‘the’ sign?”* but doesn’t seem to give a direct answer. The question is, *“why?”* Why not just tell them? Why not just tell us? Is he being capricious? Perhaps he is being a bit coy? The disciples asked a simple question, why not just give a simply answer? And isn’t that what we all really want? The end is coming after all…a little insider information would be nice! Let’s have it Jesus! Tell us the sign when it will come. A *“yes”* or *“no”* will suffice!

 Now, this may be what *“we”* want but we have to ask this question concerning Judgment Day: Would knowing *“the”* sign be best for us? Apparently, Jesus didn’t think so and do you know what? Jesus is right. And do you know why? Well, Jesus doesn’t tell us *“the”* sign to protect us and when I say, *“to protect us”* I do not mean to protect us from false-christs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes or famines or even persecution. What I mean is that he is protecting us from ourselves. That may strike you as odd but Jesus knows our human nature and he knows what we would do if we knew for certain *“the”* sign that he was returning and that judgment was coming.

 Back in 1988, a former NASA scientist wrote a book called, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Definitely Occur in 1988.*  His prediction, based upon some dubious biblical interpretation and some complicated mathematical gymnastics, said that Jesus would come some time during a week in September of 1988 when the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur was being celebrated.

 Wildly popular among evangelical Christians, the book led many to actually sell their property, travel to Jerusalem, set up camp on the Mount of Olives, pray 24 hours a day and wait for Jesus to come. We even had a friend who we had to talk out of doing the very same thing. What was the result? Well, look around you; we are all still here! His prediction of Jesus’ return in 1988 could not have been more wrong. As a bit of irony, the book actually has a 1989 edition!

 The reason that we need protection from ourselves is that if we actually knew *“the”* sign, what would we do? I can tell you. Our sinful nature would try to take control of our destinies. We would try to make ourselves ready for Jesus’ return. We would stop living by faith, trusting in Jesus and his promises and them alone and slip into works righteousness.

 Now, you may be saying, *“Oh, come on Pastor! Works righteousness? Give me a break!”* Well, follow me on this: if you knew for certain that, without a doubt, that Jesus was returning one month after the Cardinals manager Mike Shildt won Manager of the Year, would you change the way you live? How would you spend that month? How different would that month be from how you would spend it if you didn’t know Jesus was coming?

 Let’s be honest, my bet is that all of our months would dramatically change. How many of you feel that you would start to take your faith more seriously? How many of you would attempt to put your spiritual house in order? How many would finally witness to your unbelieving neighbor, your friend, or your relative about Jesus? How many would try to clean your act up a bit so that when Jesus came, he would not catch you doing something you ought not to be doing? If you would change, and, most of us would, that’s works righteousness because my friends, faith is always prepared for Jesus’ return!

 And that is Jesus’ point and why he desires to protect us. We would all so easily slip away from living by faith and right back into a works righteous mode if we knew. And, if you think you are alone, you are not. When I was in Chicago, I remember discussing this in a circuit meeting. The question was asked, *“If you knew Jesus was coming in a week, would you change your life?”* Then, Pastor Adam Dietrich, a wise father in Christ, spoke up and said, *“At a minimum, I must admit, the temptation to change would be there.”* I loved his honesty.

 Our sinful nature always seeks ways to prepare itself because, at least in our minds, it is easier to trust in ourselves than it is to trust in Christ. However, faith is always prepared because the object of our faith is what saves us. That object is Jesus and it is what he does that makes us always prepared for Judgment Day whenever it comes! And this is true whether it is a thousand years from today or…today! Faith does not look for signs and it does not look to rely upon itself to *“get ready”* for Jesus’ return. Faith looks to Christ and to his cross alone for salvation and is therefore always prepared.

 Jesus tells these disciples and us who look for *“the”* sign all of these signs precisely because they are common to every generation of every time. In essence, he is saying that because we will all see these signs all the time, *we should always be prepared*. And to be prepared with the understanding that it is not we who prepare ourselves for Judgment Day but that it is Jesus who prepares us to see God face to face. By his washing us in his blood he has cleansed us from all of our sin and so it does not matter when he comes. And our lives should not change because we should always be living as Christians . . . serving him and one another.

 In fact, it is exactly because of Jesus dying on the cross for our sin that we can as the last verse in our reading says, *“Straighten up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.”*  Faith continually looks to the heavens to see the great day of the coming of our Lord because by faith we need not fear the Day of Judgment. Instead, by faith we understand that judgment day for us means our final deliverance from sin, death and the devil and that is something to which I personally look forward.

 My fellow redeemed, Martin Luther said that every Christian should live his life as if Christ died yesterday, was raised today and will return tomorrow. I could not agree more. However, if you feel the need to fix your eyes on a sign, let it be the sign . . . let it be on the cross where Jesus died for your sin. Fix your gaze upon it as you live your life with your head raised waiting for your redemption and let your daily prayer be, “*Come quickly, Lord Jesus.”* In Jesus’ name. Amen.