

The Locus of Thanksgiving

It's clear from the lessons for today that the theme is "suffering." Everyone suffers. Job suffers. The Christians in Thessalonica suffer. Jesus warns the apostles how Jerusalem is going to suffer, using words like "abomination of desolation" and "alas/woe." "*Woe to those pregnant women and nursing infants who will be caught up in all this destruction and devastation.*" And to all this we could certainly add our long litany of sufferings and grievances, right? Life as a faithful Christian in this fallen and increasingly wicked world can be downright miserable. The point is: Everyone suffers. It's been this way ever since our first parents chose to listen to a snake rather than to God, and it will be this way until God mercifully puts an end to all this and Christ returns in final judgment and glory.

Now, given the fact that suffering is so universal, it should come as no surprise that the natural desire to avoid suffering is also universal. Unless you're mentally ill in some way, man's natural inclination is to avoid any and all suffering at all costs. ***No one wants to suffer!*** We see this especially in the verses leading up to our Gospel lesson. The apostles just got done raving over how big and strong and beautiful the temple was, and Jesus responds by telling them that not one single stone will be left standing upon another. That magnificent temple would be utterly destroyed. This really rattles their cage. "*Lord, when will all this go down? What will be the sign that the end is near?*" The implication is clear: They want some warning before all this incomprehensible terror breaks loose. They want a head start. They want to be able to escape all that suffering and devastation. But... Jesus doesn't give them what they want to hear. "*See that no one leads you astray.*"

This is important. It's important for us today. While the theme of today's lessons may be suffering, the focus is really on ***God's care and compassion*** for the faithful sufferer. As I said just a few moments ago, everyone wants to avoid suffering. Christians are no different. And this is where the problems really tend to arise. You see, the devil isn't dumb. You know as well as I do that when suffering arises, people tend to get "real religious real quick," and this is where the devil does some of his best work. When you're drowning, everything becomes a life preserver. You'll grab onto anything, even another person, if it means you can get your head above water and grab another breath. When you're suffering; when you've been beat down and you're afraid, anyone and anything that comes along with a "solution" to your suffering is going to be your life preserver. This happens all the time.

When suffering arises in your life, where are you led? Where do you flee? Where do you look? To whom/what are you listening? “*Do not be led astray.*” It sounds so easy to our ears right now, but we need to think about how we **already** stray—right now—when times are easy and the suffering is slight. This is where the problems begin; at the small end, when times are easy. This is when the devil is **already** grooming you and working to get you off track and strayed away. This is precisely why our Lord says, “*See, I have told you beforehand.*”

I think of it in terms of cross-country navigation. If I’m just one degree off on my compass heading, it doesn’t seem like such a big deal over such a small area. “*We all worship the same Jesus.*” But...projected out, over time that one-degree straying away becomes **quite serious and tragic**. We all worship the same Jesus...but either you are saved through faith alone in God’s grace alone because of Christ alone, or you are not. Either good works factor into your justification, or they don’t. Either baptism saves you, or it doesn’t. Either Christ really and truly gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins, or He doesn’t. **There is no middle ground.**

Some of you will be bothered that I break it down into such black-and-white, cut-and-dry terms. You prefer the gray and fuzzy areas. It’s **easier** that way. Nobody gets offended or bothered when “everyone is right and nobody is wrong.” **Do not be led astray!** Whether in good times or in the most terrible of times, here is the Truth of Christ, right where He has promised to be; right where He tells you to seek Him. Here is your ever-present, unchanging, unfailing joy, even in the midst of the greatest sorrow and tribulation.

Sadly, though, it’s often the one who is suffering the most who finally understands it best. I’ve been at the side of many a person who is preparing to leave this veil of tears and enter into eternity. Not one has **ever** lamented the fact that they didn’t spend more time at work and less time in prayer and worship. “*I wish I didn’t waste all those Sundays sitting in church when I could have been earning money.*” Not one has ever wished they spent more time sleeping in or golfing or fishing rather than coming into the Lord’s presence for Holy Communion. **Nope. It’s just the opposite.** Death has a way of **prioritizing** things. Those of you who’ve hit the bottom of the grief barrel can certainly relate. I know I’ve been there. You listen to people complaining about their iPhone or their job or their lawn or their vacation or the “humble” work they did in polishing the door knobs at church (which everyone needs to know about and nobody thanked them for), and you think, “*Shut up! None of that stuff matters! Don’t you get it?!*”

“*See, I have told you beforehand.*” Look here! Here is Christ! No...this isn’t like what Jesus was warning about with all the other false messiahs and false

Christ's telling to "look over here" or "go out there." **Go ahead and test the spirits.** Hold up what I'm saying to God's Word. Does it agree or does it contradict? Bear in mind: There is no new revelation. Jesus doesn't call an audible or tell you that things have changed, so close up your Bible and instead listen to Him whisper into your heart. ***Talk about being led astray!*** What has Christ ***already*** said? What has Jesus ***already*** told you in His Word? What has He ***already*** promised you? "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" And where has He promised to be with us, always, from now and to the end of the age? Right here, in His Word and His Sacraments.

Folks: I don't know what the future holds. You don't either. Nobody does. There are a lot of talking head fools who want you to think they do, **but they don't.** They'll tell you that things have ***never*** been worse and the end is upon us; the end of the Church; the end of our nation; the end of democracy; the end of the world because you use a plastic straw and eat red meat. ***All of this idiocy is nothing new, and it's only going to get worse as we inch closer to Christ's return.*** Jesus tells His disciples very plainly (in this same conversation) that the Christian living in this fallen and sinful world can expect to hear of wars and rumors of wars. They can expect nations to rise against nations; people against other people; mothers against daughters, sons against fathers. There will be famines and earthquakes and other natural devastations. ***Any of this sounding familiar at all? "All these are but the beginning of the birth pains."*** Jesus spoke these words two-thousand years ago! The point here is exactly what He says: "*I have told you all this beforehand.*" Stop freaking out, Chicken Little! Here is Christ. You're okay.

I don't know how the end will come or when the end will be; whether it's my individual ending, your individual ending, or the ending of this age. I don't know. Jesus Himself says, "*But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.*" In terms of your faith—your cleaving to Christ and His unfailing, unconditional means of grace—***should it really matter whether you have ten seconds, ten minutes, or ten years to live?*** Your health status shouldn't have any effect on your faith status. Prosperity or poverty; good times or bad times; sickness/health, surrounded by friends and family or surrounded by enemies and all alone...through it all Christ remains unchanged and unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. His love for you is the same yesterday, today, tomorrow, and into all eternity. His name that He put upon your head and your heart, marking you as one redeemed by Him, ***never fades.*** It doesn't have an expiration date or a shelf life. He remains with you always and you belong to Him...***always.***

As long as this age endures, here He is and here He will be...for you. Understood in faith, about the only thing that really changes when you leave this

veil of tears and go home to heaven, you go from feasting with Christ at this end of His table (earthly end) to that end of His table (the heavenly end). That's about it (along with no more weeping, crying, mourning, pain, sorrow, etc.). ***That's not so bad, is it?***

May your joy, your peace, and your blessed assurance never go astray nor be found anywhere else. May you ever and always be centered up and grounded in the all-availing, unwavering, and unfailing righteousness of Christ Jesus; the same righteousness He has already clothed you with in baptism. May this cruciform, baptismal reality be your reason to give thanks to God, now and into all eternity.

AMEN