

## Gospel in the Midst

Take a look at the world we live in today. Things are bad. No one will argue. But... they're not nearly as bad as they could be, right? ***Things can always be worse.*** Even on our worst day, we Americans still enjoy comforts and luxuries that 99% of the rest of the world can only dream of. Our lowest of the low are still better off than the vast majority of the rest of the world throughout all of history. ***Things can always be worse—WAY WORSE.*** Just think of the descriptions of Judgment Day you just heard in the Scripture passages appointed for today. Speaking through Malachi, God describes Judgment Day as a day that is like a burning oven that completely incinerates sinners and turns them into ash under the foot. ***And you thought you had it bad?*** In the Gospel lesson Jesus describes a world that has completely come apart at the seams; people fainting with overwhelming fear and foreboding. ***Even the earth itself is quaking with fear and distress.*** Not even Al Gore and the acolytes of climate change can begin to imagine just how bad things will be when God returns in judgment. And what about all those other passages that speak about a terrible day of darkness and death and fiery destruction? Yeah... things can/will definitely get way worse. I understand why so many Christians are ***absolutely terrified*** of Judgment Day. I understand why so many Christians are afraid that Jesus will come back in their lifetime. The thought of Christ's return, for so many people, is a ***terrible threat; something they really hope to avoid.*** All they see and hear with these words is an angry God threatening them with, "***Don't make me come down there!***"

The danger for us today is that we hear these Scripture passages and we, too, get caught up and rattled by the harsh words of God's final, authoritative, and deadly response to sin and evil and rebellious unbelief, ***and we wind up missing His Gospel comfort for us.*** If you look in Malachi, the righteous ones; that is, those who have been justified through faith alone in God's grace alone, **are alive and well.** They've been brought through the tribulation. They're not incinerated and turned to ash. They've been saved. In fact, they are walking ***victoriously*** in the dust and ash that remains after God has put all the evil enemies to death. Jesus Himself tells us in Luke's Gospel to "***lift up our eyes***" when we see these terrifying, apocalyptic things happening, because the Son of Man—the victorious Jesus Christ in the flesh—***is returning in all power and glory...*** just as we confess in our creeds. To lift up the head/eyes is a posture of eager expectation and victory. You hold your head high, right?

Just think about what Jesus is telling us here. He speaks of His "power" on full display. This *dunamis*—this power of God—is the power of salvation to all who believe. **Only** the Gospel of Jesus Christ has this power, and St. Paul exhorts that we should never be ashamed of this Gospel Word of God precisely because it—***and it alone***—is the power of salvation to all who believe. Jesus Christ will

return again with this same power on full display. He will return in all power and glory.

**Glory: That's an Old Testament word.** The glory of the Lord is what Israel looked to and followed during their wilderness sojourning. The glory of the Lord—pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night—led the Israelites throughout their time wandering in the desert's shadow of death. This glory of the Lord would come to a stop, letting the Israelites know exactly where they were to erect the tabernacle; the holy house where Almighty God Himself “tented with” and dwelt with His people. When that divine glory would pick up and leave, the people were to follow, trusting that God knew what He was doing, and He was working all things for their good and their salvation.

This is why I love the second part of Jesus' Gospel discourse. He directs us to the fig tree. “*You can tell by looking at the fig tree that when you see the buds and leaves forming on the branches summer is near.*” You can connect those dots, right? So it is with the coming of the Son of Man. It's all part of His plan. It's all running right on schedule—His schedule. So... when you see all these things happening all around you (as we do), ***connect the dots, straighten up and lift up your eyes to heaven***, for your salvation—your Yeshua (Hebrew)—is drawing near and coming to you. Folks: I don't know about you, but that's Gospel comfort and peace to my ears!

This is why these texts are Advent texts! Remember: Advent isn't a mere warm-up act for Christmas. It's not a churchly pep-rally intended to help us get into the “spirit of Christmas” and baby Jesus and such. No! ***It's about making repentant preparation for the coming of our Lord and Savior.*** This Savior did come to us to save us from our sin. There's a reason our God and Lord took on our flesh and had that flesh nailed to a cross: **for us and our sin; for our sake; for our salvation.** There's the repentant nature of Advent [the crucifix]. And remember, also, that this adventing wasn't just past-tense, ***nor is it just a future-tense, Judgment Day thing either.*** It's not like Jesus came once upon a time as a baby, and sometime in the unforeseen future He'll come again in glory on Judgment Day, but until then we're left to fend for ourselves. ***NO! He comes to us today! He advents with us today, even in the midst of all the sorrows and fears and chaos and uncertainty!***

Folks: Here is Almighty God Himself, **in your midst**, bringing to you His life and peace that surpasses all understanding. Notice: Faith in God doesn't magically take away the calamities, the sorrows, and the suffering! It's sad that we so often need to be reminded of this, but we do. No one is immune from sin and the symptoms of sin. ***God never promises you a “cross-less” life; that is, a life without fear or suffering or pain or despair.*** “*Take up your cross and follow Me.*” I say this because plenty of people (including and especially the fool in the

mirror) will offer you a different gospel; a gospel that promises easy street; a gospel that promises you a pain-free prosperity in the here-and-now. “*You just gotta do this, that, and the other thing.*” ***That’s garbage straight out of the devil’s mouth!*** “*It is finished.*” Christ has done it all...for you. Yes, you will have sufferings and pains and sorrows. I’m not going to tell you different. You are a sinner living in a sinful world. So am I. The signs and proofs of this are all around us. They are plain to see, and becoming plainer to see every single day. ***Straighten up. Raise your head. Look to, flee to, and hold fast to God.*** Look no further than right here; right where He tells you to seek Him.

Look to the font. Look to the altar. Look to the Word. Understood through the God-given eyes and ears of faith, you are able to recognize your God and Lord, not in some far distant heavenly corner at the end of some cosmic maze, ***but right here, right now.*** ***In spite of*** your pains and sorrows and sufferings, here is Almighty God, holding out to you His mercy and grace and peace. In the very midst of this shadowy valley of death and despair, Almighty God is right here, even as pandemic germs and pandemic fears/anxieties spread; even as wildfires rage and hurricane winds and storm-tossed seas roar; even as the earth quakes and splits and crumbles. God is right here, even in the midst of wars and rumors of wars and corruption and sedition and mob violence in the name of “progressive wokeness.” ***The gates of hell will not prevail***, so neither will COVID; neither will wildfires or hurricanes, or any other natural disaster (or all of them, for that matter). ***The gates of hell will not prevail***, so neither will a bunch of godless fools and rebels; neither will cancer nor job loss nor stock market crash nor custody battles nor anything else under the sun. The gates of hell will not and cannot prevail against our Lord. As one of our Lutheran forefathers said, “*Where Christ stands, the devil must flee.*”

**Here is Christ.** In spite of all the sin and sinful terror and fear and foreboding that we so foolishly call “life,” ***here is Christ.*** Richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in good times and in the worst of times, here is Christ. ***Do you see?*** Look to the sure and certain promise He’s given you in baptism. You’ve been baptized into His death and resurrection. You bear His name upon your head and your heart, marking you as redeemed. His victory is your victory, and that victory has already been won. “*It is finished,*” right? **Well... act like it!** Straighten up. Hold your head high...***and rejoice.*** Give thanks unto the Lord, for He ***IS*** good, and His steadfast love endures forever.

In His holy and precious name...**AMEN**