

**3<sup>rd</sup> Last Sunday of the Church Year: November 10, 2019**  
**“Lovely Vultures”**

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. As unsettling as it was to sit and wait for me to say something, our text recalls a more unsettling scene, “**Matthew 24:28.**”

The word for vulture is the same for eagle. It doesn't really matter which way you translate it; the point is these are birds that are readily identified with death. At first, this may seem like a law statement as though Christ is saying, “The devil, the world, and the sinful flesh are like vultures who circle and swoop down to eat their prey. Like a ravening lion, the devil seeks someone to devour.” But the animals these vultures circle are already dead.

Looking at the context, Jesus is actually speaking these words as Gospel. He assures the disciples that when He comes again, everyone will know it at the same time. While many are looking for comfort in suffering, do not be dissuaded by the notion of false hope. There is only one Christ, and He has been telling us beforehand from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to David to the prophets to John the Baptist. God does not work in secret for your salvation. His words and His works of salvation for you are simple and clear so there can be no mistake.

***“Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather,”*** is as if to say, “Just as the eagle or vulture does not paint for himself the place to fly, so also it doesn't choose its place of dining. Where the carcass is, there the vultures will be gathered. So also, where the Word is washed over dead sinners, proclaimed to those dead in trespasses and sins, and given to those mourning over sin; there I am in the midst of them. Where the dead are in need of the Gospel, there I am.” Christ came not for the righteous, not for those who have life; He came for those who are dust and to dust shall return. He came for those whom is cursed with death in order to give them eternal life.

Christ came for you. If you had to pull one theme from today's readings, it would be suffering. Everyone suffers, and it is caused by sinful people in a sinful world. Israel in Exodus attempted to alleviate their suffering of a false perception of being left alone in the wilderness, by fashioning a god and throwing a party with a great feast.

They attempted to distract themselves from the pain around them, and by doing so, they turned not to God—they turned to themselves. In the end, their suffering was worsened, as they not only had the guilt of loving the feast of the golden calf and the shame of having to explain their actions to God; they also had the physical punishment of having to drink the calf ground into their water. It was to show just how deep their corruption of this false idol had penetrated.

In our Epistle reading, we hear how the Christians in Thessalonica suffer. Death was at the forefront of their minds. Death is not a natural thing. The world would have us believe this lie in efforts to ease our conscience, but Genesis 3 makes it clear—suffering and death is a punishment, a curse from God, a result of the fall into sin, ***“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”***<sup>1</sup> Paul recalls this to the church in Rome, ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***<sup>2</sup>

As hard as it is, it is important to talk about death in the right way. It is important to confess a person has died, not just simply passed on, or passed away. We use the words very clearly that Jesus died and rose again. It should give us more comfort to confess biblically the realities of suffering and death. As I suffer and die, Jesus suffered and died. He was buried. I am buried. He rose again. I rise again. In our culture of trying to soften everything, we end up saying a whole lot of nothing about everything. We get ourselves so twisted around that we even get confused by the simple confessions of faith. The truth of death and life in Christ is so important that Paul ends that section by saying, ***“encourage one another with these words.”***<sup>3</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:19

<sup>2</sup> Romans 6:23

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:18

The point is: everyone suffers. It's been this way ever since our first parents chose to listen to the ancient foe 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 is upsetting to them on a fundamental level. They had grown up learning to love this building and the many things that happening there. They had been taught to love the traditions it passed down, and they were to devote their lives to the ongoing maintenance of this building.

They knew the history of the temples in the past, both the glory it held and the problems that ensued with its destruction. So when they hear of the temple going to be destroyed again, how could they not recall Babylon? So they, in unnerved fervor question, "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. From Adam to you, everyone wants to avoid suffering; and this is where the problems really tend to arise. The devil is not 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.

When suffering arises in your life, where are you led? Where do you flee? Where do you look? To what do you cling? To whom 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.*”

This makes me think of helping my dad in the fall. I would plow the field, and this was before the days of GPS. If I started off a bit off going down the line, it wasn't a big deal for the first few feet, but if I were to continue down to the end of the field—that little bit became a long ways! Ask a carpenter, about the importance of having a properly working level, or military personnel the importance of a properly working compass. If the compass heading is just one degree off, it doesn't seem like much over a small area, but one degree over a longer-stretch becomes more and more serious that you are a long way off.

Consider this common heard phrase today, “We all worship the same Jesus.” We may speak the same name, but do we understand and confess Him the same? Even one slight degree of difference can become quite serious and tragic. Either you are dead, and the vultures are there, or you are not. Either you are dead in sin, or you are not. Either you need Jesus, or you don't. 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.

I know this is upsetting to some. It bothers the conscience and the sinful nature to break it down and confess in such black and white terms. Many prefer the gray areas, because it is less confrontational. It's easier that way. Nobody gets offended or bothered when “everyone is right and nobody is wrong.”

Do not be led astray by false Christs! 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. Where the carcass is, there the vultures gather.

Jesus doesn't call an audible or tell you that things have changed. He doesn't tell you to close your Bibles and listen for Him to 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 to the end of the age? Right here, in His Word and His Sacraments.

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, and 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 dead carcasses, it's ok. The vulture covers you as a hen covers her chicks.

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, ***“Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only...Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”***<sup>4</sup> 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 forever. His love for you is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 24:36, 42

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. The vultures will gather, and these reminders of water, word, bread, and wine proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

***“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”<sup>5</sup> “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep...and so we will always be with the Lord.”<sup>6</sup> Amen.***

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 116:15

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 17

**Prayer of the Church**  
**Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity**  
**10 November 2019**

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

For the priesthood of the baptized, that through the ongoing reception of the Holy Word and Sacraments, their faith in the Lord's promises would be increased, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all pastors in Christ, that they would be faithful in their duty to preach the whole counsel of God to the flocks they serve, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For an increase of workers sent out to serve in the Lord's vineyard of grace, that the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ's name would be heard by all sinners, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For protection against the schemes of the devil, that God's children would, by the power of the Spirit, don the whole armor of God to withstand all demonic assaults and remain steadfast in the Word, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who live without faith in Christ, that the Holy Spirit would call them to repentance and grant them a confident trust in Jesus, who lived and died for them and all sinners, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For a culture of life to spread throughout our land, that all life from the womb to the grave would be cherished and protected, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those whom God has placed in authority over us, that they would serve with integrity and honor, striving for peace and the collective good of all, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those whom God has granted another year of earthly life, especially His servants *Zachery and Esther*; that they may grow in wisdom and grace, and that God would strengthen their trust in His goodness all the days of their life; let us pray to the Lord; **Lord have mercy.**

For the joy and blessings that God has granted *Verne & Denise* during the years of their marriage; that God would assist them always by His grace that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may ever honor and keep their marriage vows, grow in love towards Him and for each other, and come at last to the eternal joys that He have promised; let us pray to the Lord; **Lord have mercy.**

For all who are sick or suffering in any way, and for all who have requested our prayers, [*including Larry, Zoey, Dennis and those we name in our hearts*], that they would be relieved of their afflictions, according to the Lord's will, or strengthened to endure, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**