

Last Sunday in the Church Year: November 25, 2018

“That Calls for a Celebration”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. Our text is our Old Testament Reading, Isaiah 65, especially these words, *“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.”*¹

On this Last Sunday of the church year, we turn our attention to what the Scriptures say about death, judgment, and the future state. God’s word expressly states that all things, visible and invisible, that is the entire cosmos, the universe created by God in the beginning, will pass away.

And yet, while heaven and earth will pass away and are changed, God will continue forever, and so will His Word, including His Word who became flesh, suffered, died, rose, ascended for us and now sits at God’s right hand. Psalm 102 declares, *“Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.”*² In Luke Jesus affirms, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”*³

Our winter weather is perfect for this remembrance. One day, the sun gleams gently on the hills, the dark green pine trees sit calmly in drifts of snow, and the clear, calm, pale blue sky gives beautiful radiant light to God’s great landscape. Then the next day, the weather outside is frightful. The snow flies, the wind blows and threatens the lives of every creature unfortunate enough to be out in the elements with no place of shelter. From one day to the next, we learn to love, and to fear, what we call nature. So much respect has been given to this phenomenon

¹ Isaiah 65:17-19

² Psalm 102:25–27

³ Luke 21:33

that every pagan religion has some sort of deity regarded lovingly as “Mother Nature,” and the understanding that, “If momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.”

Now here is a kicker, there is something unnatural about using the term nature. There really is no such thing. Yes, there is sky, earth, trees, lakes, rivers, ponds and oceans. Yes, there is weather and change of seasons. Yes, there are these things and many more, but none of these think, none of these act as one with a mind, none of these do things as though they have their own will. These things are all created by God Himself. Genesis 1, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*”⁴

God spoke, and it was so. It is not like God moved and rearranged the furniture of the cosmos to fix the feng shui. He created everything out of nothing. There was nothing. God spoke, and then there was. The only thing in creation created just a bit differently is man. He created mankind by getting His hands dirty; forming from the dust of the ground (which He created already by speaking), and then He breathed into it the breath of life. God, our Heavenly Father created from nothing, and still takes care of it.

God did not create and just let things run on their own. Creation is not left to its own devices. Just imagine that for a moment, how scary would that truly be? Strictly speaking, the laws of nature are not that at all. Nature does not pass, repeal, or enforce any law. Rather, there is One God who alone governs and serves as its Lord.

Why the snow, the rain, the wind, the sun, the clouds? Simply, God set its course. Why does the sun rise in the east and set in the West? God has thus determined it to be so. Does it not amaze you that everyone talks about the weather? It is one of the first ice breaker conversations, and here is the great part, none of you can do anything about it!

Recall last week, and put these last two Sunday’s together and what picture do you see? Not only does God direct the movements of the heavenly bodies, the weather, the flights of birds, and every natural thing. God also directs the movements of nations and rulers. He decides who will rise and fall and when. God is in charge of

⁴ Genesis 1:1

this world, visible and invisible. There is only ***“One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”***⁵

How often, do we His creatures, His beloved children, question and wonder, “What in the world are you doing God?” We have been taught to fear, love and trust in Him. We have been taught to not blame God, yet, we still do blame Him, don’t we? Rather than trust, we question. We wonder, and worry, and fret, and doubt when bad things do happen.

Think about it, there is a conflict that just won’t go away. There are two things that we believe and confess that are in tension. God is good and God is almighty. How do you reconcile a good, gracious, loving God who permits some very evil things to happen that you think He should have prevented to test you? Does God want evil to happen? No. So then, is it that God is powerless over evil to keep it from happening? No. Well then, what is it? This conflict, this tension, this testing of faith, does lead some to deny God altogether. They become angry with the almighty God who permits evil to prosper and apparently does nothing to stop it. They put God on trial. They try and convict Him. Then they smugly go on their way, presuming to believe that they have debunked all this Christian foolishness.

But they are the fools. The word of God is ***“a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.”***⁶ Psalm 14, ***“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.”***⁷

Now, if you want to be truly logical captain, if you want to fully complete their argument, then let us do that together. If there is a conflict between God’s goodness and His almighty power in light of the evil that exists in the world, that what does God have to do to win the approval of these critics? The answer is simple: He must destroy all evil, right? Here is the problem. If you want God to destroy all evil, what are you asking God to do to you? Think very carefully before you answer. If God must get rid of all evil in order to pass the test that sinful man imposes on Him, won’t this require God to destroy sinful mankind once and for

⁵ Ephesians 4:6

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:23

⁷ Psalm 14:1

all? That would solve the problem, wouldn't it? And it would certainly silence God's critics!

But our Almighty God is also the gracious and loving Father who loves poor, miserable, sinners. He hates sins, but He loves you. He ***“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”***⁸ God will not stand for sinful man to put Him on trial. He is the judge who judges justly. He, who called the world into being out of nothing, will create new heavens and a new earth. Not only will he destroy the evil that distorted, corrupted, and poisoned His good world; He will utterly destroy any memory of evil. As he promised through Isaiah, ***“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.”***⁹

How will God do this? In fact, God has already done it. No, I haven't seen this brave new world and neither have you. We have not experienced pure joy, peace, delight or a life without tears and sorrow. But all of the work required in creating the new heavens and the new earth, the New Jerusalem, the people to be a gladness of God, has already been done, it has been finished. Jesus declared it so. Hanging on the cross, suffering for your sins, paying for you, Jesus said of this work, ***“It is finished.”*** On the glorious tree, on that bloody hill, the sorrow of death and the failure of sin has already been swallowed up. ***“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”***¹⁰

Brothers and sisters in Christ, heaven is not just a wonderful place in which there are no troubles or pain. Heaven is much more than that. It is where Jesus is. Is it not true that He is ascended and sits at the right hand of God? Is it not true that where two or three are gathered in His Name, He is among them in their midst? Is it not true that at this altar, in the very Supper of the Lord, ***“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we***

⁸ 1 Timothy 2:4

⁹ Isaiah 65:17-19

¹⁰ Isaiah 53:4

*break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”*¹¹ Brothers and sisters, do you know what this means? Heaven is not that far away!

I know that the joy of heaven is a pure and holy joy that cannot be adequately expressed in any language. God has given us glimpses of this reality and uses our language to teach us some of what we can expect to experience there. God says, “*I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people; nor more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.*”¹² The sorrow is here and now. It is here and now that we struggle between what God says we are and what we feel we are. We feel and we experience and we see sin, death, destruction, betrayal, decay, and every kind of evil. We live with it all around us. We see it within us. It causes us sorrow. The more we want to be like Jesus the more we know we’re not.

But God sees us as we really are. He sees that holy and beautiful Church that we can only discern by simple faith in His word. He invites us to look up, beyond the sin and death we see in ourselves, to look up, and see on Calvary the sin washed away forever. He has washed His bride. He has made you a new creation. His word endures forever, and He has washed you in that everlasting Word. You have been baptized and are a new creation. You are fed with that everlasting Word, and through His death, you are given life. You are sustained with His very Word and thus we know, there is an eternal life and that believers will come to behold God as He is, and to enjoy unspeakable bliss in soul and body at the Resurrection. Thus, at the Last Day, in Jesus Body, no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. Amen.

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

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 10:16

¹² Isaiah 65:19

Prayer of the Church
Last Sunday of the Church Year
25 November 2018

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. Almighty and eternal God, worthy to be held in reverence by all people everywhere, we give You humble and sincere thanks for the innumerable blessings that You have bestowed on us without any merit or worthiness on our part. We praise You especially for preserving for us Your saving Word and Holy Sacraments. Grant and preserve to Your Holy Church throughout the world purity of doctrine, and provide faithful pastors to preach Your Word with power. Help all who hear the Word rightly to understand and truly to believe it. Send laborers into Your harvest, and open the door of faith to those who do not know You. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, in mercy bring to repentance the enemies of Your Church, and grant them amendment of life. Protect and defend Your Church in all tribulation and danger, and sustain with Your Spirit our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who experience persecution. Strengthen us and all fellow Christians to set our hope fully on the grace revealed in Christ, and help us to fight the good fight of faith, that in the end we may receive the salvation of our souls. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, bestow Your grace on all nations of the earth. Bless especially our country, its inhabitants and all who are in authority. Let Your glory dwell in our land, that mercy and truth, righteousness and peace may abound in all places. Bless also all who serve in our armed forces, that they may serve with integrity and honor. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, our times are in Your hands. Look with favor, we pray, on Your servants *Oliver and Jenna* whom You have granted another year of earthly life. Grant that *they* may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen *their* trust in Your goodness all the days of *their* life; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Compassionate Lord, graciously defend us from all calamity by fire and water, from war and pestilence, from scarcity and famine, and from every other evil. Protect and prosper all who labor in their rightful callings, and let all useful arts flourish among us. Be the God and Father of the lonely and the forsaken, the Helper of the sick and needy, the Comforter of the distressed and those who sorrow. Look with mercy especially upon those who have requested our prayers, [*including _____*], that they may ever cling to Jesus as their sure and certain hope. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Grant Your Holy Spirit to those who come to the Lord's table this day, that they may receive the very body and blood of Jesus Christ in sincere repentance and firm faith and to their abundant blessing. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Father, as we are strangers and pilgrims on earth, help us by true faith and a godly life to prepare for the world to come, doing the work You have given us to do while it is day, before the night comes when no one can work. And when our last hour comes, support us by Your power, and receive us into Your heavenly Kingdom; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**