

“Christ is Near”

“In the beginning” the Lord told Adam that he was not to eat of a certain tree in the Garden of Eden – “for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die.” Rather than living by faith in God’s Word which preserved their lives – Adam and Eve ate – and by their sin, death has come to all creation.

We live in that sin-fallen creation – that dead and dying world. Death is all around us – and daily we are reminded of our own mortality.

Christians down through the ages have developed a calendar – a Church Year which helps us to order our days. Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God, God’s children have lived by His promise given already to Adam and Eve – the promise of a Savior from sin and the death that it brings.

The Church Year begins with the seasons of Advent and Christmas – leading us to the fulfillment of this promise of a Savior – celebrating the coming of God’s own Son into the flesh and His birth in Bethlehem.

Lent and Holy Week and Easter lead us to the Christ who crushes Satan’s head by His Good Friday death on Calvary – securing the victory over sin and death – with His resurrection on the third day showing forth His victory, new life is given to all creation.

Then, during that long season after Pentecost, this calendar shows that this new life is sustained by God through the Word and Sacraments of Jesus Christ. Which brings us to the end of the Church Year, where we find ourselves now – with God preserving our life in these last days – even as we await His judgment on the Last Day.

The Church’s calendar and Creation coincide. At this time of year, the creation around us reminds us of death. The green trees turn brown – their leaves are scattered – and it looks like only the bones are left.

Animals migrate and hibernate. The light wanes, leaving us in the darkness – with a cold that grips us and will not let go.

Through the year, and years – our body preaches our own mortality – reminding us that the wages of sin is death. We see loved ones die – and our own mortality is made apparent, as our bodies creep ever closer to the grave. Daily we endure aches and pains. Our sight, our hearing, our memory is fleeting. We are slowing down.

We are like the disciples of Jesus who ask when will all of these things take place. When will I be delivered? Where is my relief?

The signs of the end that Jesus gives strip away those places where they have found refuge in the past. The “noble stones and offerings” of the Temple will be destroyed when Jerusalem is surrounded and laid waste. “As for these things that you see,” Jesus says to His disciples, “the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (21:6).

What Jesus foretells comes to be in the year 70 AD when the Roman armies attack Jerusalem – a time of “great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people” Jesus says – and Jerusalem and the Temple are “trampled underfoot by the Gentiles.”

The Temple – the place where God has dwelt in the midst of His people. The place where the blood of sacrifices were poured out because God promised to atone for the sin of His people by such means. The place of refuge for hearts burdened by sin, and for sinners who fear God’s righteous judgment – gone! Now where shall we flee for refuge?

And if that were not bad enough, all of Creation is shaken! The world around us becoming UN-created! “People fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world.”

But in the midst of all that – the Lord has not forsaken us. He has not left us to be destroyed along with the rest of Creation. No, He promises – and has given us – a Savior who is our Shepherd. Jesus, born in Bethlehem and crucified on Calvary – gathers His flock of believers and shepherds them to their only place of refuge – the holy, Christian Church.

The old Temple is replaced by the new Temple – which is Jesus Christ Himself. God in the flesh who dwells in the midst of us – in the midst of His Church – and by His blood, forgives all our sin.

So now what? What are we, God's children who live in these last days, to do? Hunker down inside the walls of a church? Begin a monastic life cut off from the rest of the world? Just hang out here at Immanuel until Christ comes again? Well, yes, and no.

Yes, we continue to be gathered here to this place of refuge – gathered to our Savior Jesus Christ who reconciles us to God, who announces God's judgment of "not guilty" upon repentant sinners, hearing His Word and receiving His Sacraments to strengthen us for these days.

But No. God's Word to us in our Epistle lesson for today tells us that we are not to be idle. Don't cut yourself off from the world – but stay in the world – and get busy. Be about the things that God has given you to do in these days. Be the husband and wife He calls you to be – and fathers and mothers – children, citizens, workers, etc.

Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead – and like His disciples we ask, "when?" The truth is that we don't know. God's Holy Word tells us that we cannot know that day or time – but He tells us that Christ is near – He is at the door.

What does this mean for you, the Christian? It means that you live all your days "in Christ Jesus." You live with faith in His forgiveness, His deliverance, and His gift of life everlasting – even as your hands are busy with what the Lord has given you to do – loving your neighbor, those whom He has placed around you and called you to serve.

Your life is one of hope, not fear – for your redemption is near – as near as Christ who is even now in the midst of us. The Lord strips away all our chosen places of refuge and gathers us to the only lasting refuge – Jesus Christ, our Savior.

"Straighten up and raise your heads, because your Redemption is here --- Jesus is here. His blood blots out all your transgressions. His grace comforts your fears. His resurrected life gives you eternal life. For He is your Refuge and your Salvation. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds
in Christ Jesus. Amen.