

“Christ is Near”

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned against God’s clear Word of life – bringing death and destruction into His “good” creation – God’s children have lived by the promise first given to Adam and Eve – the promise of a Savior from sin, and the death it brings.

We live with death all around – but we do not live without hope. There’s a reason why Christians have developed their own calendar – centered around this promise of the Savior. It begins with the seasons of Advent and Christmas – leading us to the fulfillment of this promise – and celebrating the coming of God’s Son in the flesh, and His birth in Bethlehem.

Lent and Holy Week lead us to repentance – and to the crushing of the serpent’s head in Jesus’ Good Friday death. And with His Easter resurrection on the third day – His victory over sin and death is manifested to the world – and new life is breathed into His creation.

Then that long, green season after Pentecost – showing us the need for this new life to be nourished, strengthened, protected, sustained – which the Savior does through His Word and Sacraments.

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 final judgment on the Last Day – and our eternal deliverance from all evil.

Have you noticed how the Church’s calendar, and Creation, coincide at this time of year? The world around us reminds us of the end of life – the green trees turn brown, their leaves fall and are scattered, and the skeleton of branches is all that remains.

Animals migrate, and hibernate. The light wanes as the darkness encroaches – the cold grips us and will not let go – as the days grow short.

Even closer to home, our own bodies preach our mortality – reminding us that the wages of sin is death. Daily we endure the aches and pains as our bodies creep ever closer to the grave. Our sight, our hearing, our memory is fleeting. We slow down. We see loved ones die – and hear of friends as well.

We are like the disciples of Jesus who ask WHEN will all these things take place? WHEN will I be delivered? WHERE is my relief?

With His Word, and the signs He gives, Jesus strips away those places where His disciples have sought 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, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another ...”

About forty years later His words come to fruition when the Romans attack and destroy Jerusalem – a time of “great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people,” Jesus says. Jerusalem and Temple “trampled underfoot by the Gentiles.”

Imagine that ... the place where God dwelt in the midst of His people ... destroyed. The place where the blood of sacrifices was poured out because God promised to atone for their sins by such means. The place of refuge for hearts burdened by sin – a place to flee from vengeance – a refuge of life in a dead and dying world. Gone.

And it that were not bad enough – all of Creation is shaken – as if the world is becoming Uncreated – “people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world.”

And yet, we are not without hope. The Lord has not forsaken us. He has not left us to be destroyed with the rest of Creation. He has promised – and has given us – a Savior – One who shepherds us.

Jesus, the Son of God – born in Bethlehem and crucified on Calvary – gathers His flock of believers, and shepherds them into their only place of refuge – the holy Christian Church.

The “noble stones” of the old Temple, built according to God’s blueprint and design – and filled with the “offerings” prescribed for God’s people – has been replaced by the NEW Temple. Jesus is God in the flesh – dwelling in the midst of His people – atoning for our sin by His blood, sharing His life that has no end.

So now what? What are we – God’s children living in these last days – to do? Hunker down inside the walls of a church? Separate ourselves from the rest of the world? Just hang out here at Immanuel until Jesus comes again? Well ... yes ... and, no.

YES, we continue to be gathered where God is present on earth – where Jesus is. We flee for refuge to Jesus – who reconciles us to God – announcing God’s judgment of “not guilty” to repentant sinners – listening to His voice, eating and drinking – being strengthened and sustain by His Word and Sacraments.

But also, NO. God speaks to us in our Epistle reading for today, telling us not to be idle. Don’t cut yourself off from the world. 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 father, wife and mother – children, citizens, workers ... that He has called you to be.

Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead – but that date is not on our calendars. We don’t know WHEN. God’s Word even tells us that we cannot know the day or time. Rather, He tells us that Christ is near – that He is Immanuel, “God with us” – God who promises that He will not leave us or forsake us.

And so, in these days, you live by faith in Jesus Christ – not by what you see with your eyes. You flee to Him for forgiveness, trust His deliverance, and relish His gift of life everlasting – even as your hands are busy with the day to day duties He has given into your hands – loving your neighbor – serving those He has placed around you.

Dearly beloved, your life is one of hope, not fear – for Christ, your redemption, draws near to you this very day. The Lord strips away all your chosen places of refuge, and gathers you to the only lasting refuge – Jesus Christ, your Savior.

Straighten up and raise your heads, because your Redemption is here --- Jesus is here --- His blood blotting out all your transgressions, His grace comforting your hearts, and His resurrection giving 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.