

“The beginning is near.” Luke 21:5-36

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

The end times... What picture do you envision, or what feeling do you get when this topic comes up? The end times. This is quite a popular topic in the wider culture as well. The end of the world. There are thousands of books written on that topic. There are hundreds of movies made.

Darkness fills the earth, there is desperation facing the inevitable, lawlessness, danger, all living creatures are filled with terror, there is utter hopelessness as death and destruction expand their reign. Those images are disturbing, but too easy to relate to.

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I guess deep down we recognize that something like that is what we deserve. That the judgment of our sins is upon us. And how interesting it is how the content of those books and movies corresponds to what Jesus foretells in Gospels.

Do you know what the most popular end-brining causes are? The end of the world is often associated with war, with nuclear war. Or with climate collapse, which brings such changes that humanity can't survive. Or with some kind of pandemic, which wipes out the entire humanity. Or with some cosmic catastrophe which destroys all life.

Sounds familiar? It should. Because that is exactly what Jesus said that there will be **“wars and tumults [...] There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.”**

But what picture do you envision, what feeling do you get when you hear about the end times? But now, let us reflect on these two questions. First, **what should we envision and how should we as Christians feel** when we think about the end times, about the end of the world? And second, **how should we prepare for it?**

First, what should we envision, how should we feel? Let's be reminded of who we are, how the Triune God sees you. You, yes, you! have received the Spirit of adoption as God's children. By this Spirit you call upon Him: “Our Father in heaven!” We are His children, and therefore also His heirs. That's true. This is who you are.

For He has chosen you, He has called you, He has justified you – our sinful condition that separated us from God is taken care of, Jesus has paid your debt, your guilt is taken away, for all the sins you have committed, and for all which you will commit till the end of your days. You are purified, you are sanctified, you are redeemed. Your Father in heaven looks at you and delights: “With you I am well pleased!” This is you!

Now, let's consider God's perspective on the end how He reveals it to us in Scriptures. He knew from the very beginning where and how He will be guiding the history from Creation to New Creation. Now everything is done, as Jesus announced: “It is finished!”

He, the Son of God, has united us to Himself, He has welcomed you into the fellowship with the Trinity as the Holy Spirit indwells in you. He, the head of His body, the Church, has gone through death and came out victorious and we, His body, will follow Him.

Now He is patiently waiting for the last one to repent and to take their place in the heavenly feast. He is patient. We are not so. Even the martyrs near His throne are crying out: “How long, O Lord?!” Until our number is complete.

He is waiting for that day. More than we do. Because, He has prepared the kingdom for you, from the foundation of the world, New Heavens and New Earth, and the Risen Jesus has gone to make that place ready for your arrival.

Just imagine, when you love someone, when you sacrifice your life for them, when you pour out your heart preparing something beautiful for them to surprise them with your generosity and loving kindness, how much would you long for them to finally see what

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you have prepared, to see surprise in their eyes, to see the tears of joy flowing down their smiling faces, to finally be able to hug them and put all your love into that hug.

The last day is coming, when you will see your Lord Jesus Christ and He will hug you so strongly, that every broken and hurting piece in your body and soul will be restored and filled with life and overflowing joy, knowing to the heart that you are so, so loved.

This is what we are to envision when we think about the end of the times, about the end of the world. You, in the hands of Jesus, bathing in His love, transformed by His grace, cleansed of all the last stains from the old-world order. Renewed, restored, blessed. Greeting with anticipation the beginning of your new life. Your life with God.

The beginning is near. Rejoice, brothers and sisters, rejoice!

But how shall we prepare for this day? That was our second question. Two things, being realistic and ready. The road to the Promised Land will not be easy. The cost of making it to our ultimate destination may be quite high. We all will have to pay a price.

It may cost you relationships with the closest, with parents, with siblings, with relatives, with friends. You may be hated by those who reject the gentle invitation of the Triune God. Your commitment to Jesus above everything else will be their accusation. No one likes that. But **“by your endurance you will gain your lives.”**

We need to be realistic. The Christian way is not covered with rose petals; it is covered with thorns. It is not a free from all trouble, blissful and relaxed journey. Not if you are a faithful disciple of Jesus. Not if you strive to live in the obedience of faith.

But also, we need to be clear where the greatest spiritual threats are hidden. I think naturally we get more worried when we hear about wars and rumours of wars, and about catastrophes and famines and pestilences. That's what gets our stress levels up.

But that's not spiritually dangerous. On the contrary, when those things happen, everyone is up on their tippy toes, worried, reflective, perhaps, even looking for God. As it was after 9/11 or during the Covid pandemic. God uses those situations to get our attention. They may be very unpleasant, but not so dangerous spiritually.

As Jesus said, these things will happen, **“but the end will not be at once.”** What then is dangerous? As the Spirit warns us: **“While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”** (1 Thes 5:3) Peace and security.

Affluence, prosperity, us feeling like we have gotten this, like we are in control.

That is where the gravest spiritual dangers are hidden. Then we are lulled into spiritual sleep, then we become lukewarm, self-indulgent, indifferent to God and careless about our salvation, and the salvation of others. Does this sound familiar? That's our age.

Therefore, we need to be ready. What does that mean? How can we be ready? When our eyes are fixed on Jesus. When we strive to fear, love and trust our God above everything else. When we are deliberate about it and inquire how to do that. When we are loyal to

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Him above everything else. When we prioritize His body, the Church and our commitment to her above everything else. When we cancel or rearrange everything else just to be with Jesus, instead of cancelling our Church's commitments if they clash with other interests.

The enemy celebrates when you miss the Divine Service, he rejoices when Christians don't get to study the Word of God together. That is his victory if instead of learning what God speaks to us and gaining His life-giving wisdom, we are listening to the world.

The enemy whispers through the noise of this world. We need to realise that we are being taught, or we can say catechised all the time, every day. The question is - who is teaching us, who do we listen to? Do we listen to our Triune God in the community of saints, or do we listen to the noise of the world, separated from the body of Christ?

Just consider how many hours per week on average we spend listening to the Lord, either in the Divine Service, or in our Bible Studies, or in home devotions, or reading or listening to the Bible or good Christian books, or podcasts? How much time per week do we spend taking in what the world has to offer? News and propaganda. What shapes us more?

It is not easy to follow the Lord on our own. This is why He unites us in His body, the Church. The fellowship of saints is so crucial for our faith. That is how we support one another, how we learn together, how we grow together, how we carry one another's burdens, that is how we serve together. It is so important.

Now think about this - how much time do we spend together with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Can we do better? How can we improve? How shall we prepare for the end? The Lord of the Church is so good to us. More than we know. He helps us.

Look around, every one of these saints and many others Jesus has given to you as gifts, to support you on this journey. You all are eternal beings, you will spend eternity together, and Jesus invites you to get on with it already now.

He Himself is here for you, hiding behind every saint, using their lips to speak His encouragement to you, using their hands to hug you with His love. This is how we are to see one another, and this is how we are to see ourselves.

Then we can joyfully reflect: "Dear Father, how can you use me to bless these fellow saints? What words of encouragement and love do you want me to speak to them? Help me, guide me with Your Spirit, so that they can see You at work in me!"

What a wonderful community good Father has given to us. To speak to us, to build us up, to be together, to share joys and burdens, to give us opportunities to serve and be served, to love and be loved. To help us to be ready for that day.

For the beginning of our new life, true and everlasting life with the Risen and Reigning Jesus. This is how we as Christians should think about the end, and this is what we should do to prepare for it. And as Jesus said: "**Straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**" The beginning is near. It certainly is.

Amen.