

### **Isaiah 30:8-17**

Eve of the Name of Jesus + December 31, 2017  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
Return

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 30:15: "For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The imagery of our Old Testament Lesson is bleak, one of an army's retreat: but it's not an organized withdrawal from battle to fight another day. This is a run-for-your-life, every-man-for-himself retreat. This is the terror when the line is breached, the enemy pouring through. This is when courage fails, when all are thrown into a panic and flee, leaving everything behind at a dead run. But the pursuers are swift; and one-by-one, every last retreating soldier is hunted down and killed. By the end of the day and the end of the text, all that is left of the morning's force is its flagstaff, a tattered banner rippling mournfully in the breeze all by itself as a testimony to what once was.

The defeated dead in the text are not just an army or a nation: this is mankind. No matter how much man speaks of progress and innovation and great leaps forward in this or that, man is always on the run. Time is always short and the day is always drawing to an end. On the surface, man does his best to make the day look normal and good; and he even tries to make the retreat and the death to be just a natural part of life's great circle, or perhaps even a foe that can be defeated. But though life may seem peaceful and normal, he's always on the run.

You can see it all around you. It's quite obvious, once you know the enemy that man is running from. The enemy isn't sin or death or devil; in this case, those foes are pitiful sideshows.

No, the tragic truth is that man has made an enemy of God. He is the One from whom they run, and there is nowhere to go.

Man has made an enemy of God. You can see this from the very beginning. God creates man and places him in Paradise. Man rejects God's Word and sins; and now by nature of that fall, he's a sinner who will always opt for evil. Part of the curse of sin is the blindness that it brings, as well as an aversion to holiness. Therefore, blinded by sin, man doesn't see that he's in the wrong; and if he's right in whatever he does, then it must be God who has the problem, who needs to lighten up and change. And when God declares Himself holy and unchanging, sinful man just rebels all the more.

Just look at how it plays out in the first half of our text, before the retreat begins. God sends messengers to the world with His Word – prophets and apostles, pastors and congregations. He makes sure that His Word is heard so that people might know that He has no desire to be their enemy, but would rather be their Savior at great cost to Himself. But what does man say to the messengers – and thus to God?

"Do not prophesy to us what is right."

"Speak to us smooth things."

"Prophesy illusions."

"Leave the way, turn aside from the path."

"Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."

So God becomes the enemy. Man rebels against the very God who would call mankind His children. In that rebellion, man plants his flagstaff on this or that hill, and his banner waves in support of this or that ideology or false religion or perversion. The great tragedy is that throughout the entire strife, the Lord is trying to bring peace. His message is not a demand of surrender, but an offer of reconciliation. He declares that He has forgiveness for all sins, peace and life for the sinful and the dying. It is why, even in the panicked retreat of Isaiah 30, God is still calling out, "Return – repent! – and rest, for in repentance you will be saved." But the repentance doesn't happen, and so judgment is coming.

The Lord patiently waits and calls out. But the rebellion only grows; and since the world can't go after the Lord, it goes after His Church instead. It goes after His people, and that would include you and me. We are still very much blessed: in many parts of the world today, Christians are being exiled or imprisoned or martyred at an alarming rate. Our lot for now is much easier: at present, we mostly face pressure to be silent about the truth. Man's demands in the Old Testament lesson are very much pressed upon Christians in America today, so listen to them again: "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."

Did you notice that all the demands are about speaking and hearing, that the people of God are to stop declaring His Word?

Please note that some of the greatest unrest in our nation revolves around words. We are told more and more that so many words must not be spoken because they are offensive to one group or another that takes them in a wrong way. It has been laughably, but dangerously, evident on college campuses near and far, where parties have argued that opposing views can be countered with slander, libel and violent protest – not for being wrong, but simply for being opposing views! Such an attitude is not confined to politics; in fact, the target is inevitably and finally the Gospel.

Everybody knows that the Bill of Rights guarantees us both freedom of speech and freedom of religion; and as long as those two stand, we should be free – and even protected! – to speak God's Word boldly and publicly. The attack upon the church usually isn't framed as a matter of speech or religion, but as discrimination. In other words, Christians are free to speak about morality, as long as they speak smoothly to agree that nobody is actually immoral. They are free to speak God's law, unless it means saying people are sinful. They are free to declare the gospel, as long as they don't say that Jesus is the only way to heaven. They can say that God created male and female, but had better prophesy the illusion that there are sixty-plus genders. This plays out perhaps most seriously right now in the court cases involving Christian bakers and photographers who face ruin because they have declined to provide services for same-sex weddings, and a significant Supreme Court case awaits to be decided this year. It is seen in arguments that freedom of religion in society really means freedom *from* religion – and that Christians may speak of their faith during the worship service, but not outside the walls of a sanctuary.

It is difficult to believe we have arrived at a place where people can argue with a straight face that the Church can't say anybody is wrong, because it's wrong to say anybody's wrong, unless you're saying that the Church is wrong, which is considered to be right. It really doesn't help when there are so-called "Christian" churches who are saying the same thing.

In fact, I sort of view our society through a lens that fits this text rather well: it is not that the world wants to attack the Church so much as it wants to keep running away from God and His Word. In the meantime, our culture doesn't have a unified message, and it's a curious thing to watch as different parties that oppose Christianity are starting to attack each other here and there. But they do seem to

agree on one thing: it's hard to run away from God and His Word when the Church faithfully says, "God is here – listen to His Word!" Thus there's always pressure on the Church to be quiet or turn aside.

As 2018 dawns, it would seem that the Church is on the defensive in the world. Given how much Christianity has been evicted from public life and morality, it would seem that the battle is lost and the rout is well underway in our nation. Add to this the declining numbers within churches everywhere, and it's easy to think we're the ones on the run in a serious way, and that it's only a matter of time in this post-Christian age until all that's left of the Church is a lonely flagstaff all by itself on the top of a hill, flapping in the breeze.

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As Christians we need a good response to all of this gloom, and I think I've got one: nonsense!

The defeat of Christianity is nonsense, and you know it: because you fix your eyes at the Church's lonely flagstaff on the top of the hill. You see that it's not a banner, but a cross; and on it hangs the Holy One of Israel. And why is He there? He told His disciples the night He was betrayed. He said, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself" (John 12:32).

Take that, devil. The devil is a master of propaganda – he is the father of lies, after all. And he's the one who's using everything he can to convince you that Christianity is on the run, that the Church's only options are to turn from the Holy One of Israel to the false gods of our age, or to die a futile death while fighting to the end. But it's all a lie. As defeated as Jesus looks hanging on that cross, you know that it's there He wins the victory over sin and death and devil. As lonely as He looks there, He is dying for all people so that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life. The Son of God has become God's enemy on the cross, so that you might be God's friend.

And having died for all, He is risen again to live and reign forever. Your Savior, my friends, isn't going anywhere.

Sometimes, when I stare at the sky at night, my eyes play tricks. I see stars and clouds, and it looks like the stars are moving quickly while the clouds stand still. In reality, it's the other way around: the stars are standing still while the clouds blow swiftly across the sky. The devil plays the same trick on you, to make it look like it's the Church on the run and headed for destruction. But remember who's on the run in the Old Testament lesson: it's not the people of God, but sinful man running away from God, whom they've made an enemy.

God is not your enemy. You, dear friends, have been gathered into Christ. You have been built upon the Rock, and rocks don't run. You've been brought into the Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

So as the world runs away from God, hell-bent to destruction, you hear that amazing invitation in the midst of that gloomy Old Testament lesson. The Lord says to you, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." It doesn't sound like a good survival plan for battle, like "fight" or "flee," but it is. Return, says the Lord: repent of your sin. Stop running. Rather than make God an enemy and flee, you confess your transgressions to the Lord – and for the sake of Jesus Christ, He forgives the iniquity of your sin.

Return, says the Lord. "In returning and rest you shall be saved." You are saved because you rest – you're at peace with God because Jesus has died for all of your sins. So, says the Lord, "In quietness and in trust shall be your strength." You're not strong enough to defeat devil, world, sin or death. You're not even strong enough to control your own sinful flesh. So your strength is in Christ, who has defeated your enemies and forgives you.

If you'd like more assurance, there's nothing better than our epistle for this evening: in a time where it seems like the world is always winning and the church is always losing, St. Paul demands, "What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" Answer: no one.

"He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all good things?" Answer: He will. He will give us all good things, because we're cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

"Who shall bring a charge against God's elect?" No one: why? Because "it is God who justifies." If God says you're forgiven and have eternal life, there's no one who can say differently.

"Who is to condemn [you]?" No one: why? Because "Christ Jesus is the One who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." If Jesus lives and declares you forgiven, there's no way you're condemned.

So it goes until St. Paul says, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Treasure those words: they were written in a time very much like this one, and they hold because Christ has died and Christ is risen. No matter how things appear, the Church is not on the run. As long as this world remains, it is our joy to shout out to the world streaming by: "Stop running! The Lord is not your enemy! Do not fight Him or run from Him, but return. Repent. Be reconciled. Find rest, for He has given His Son for you that you might have life and peace in Him forever."

So 2017 comes to an end, and we have little idea about what the future will bring. But as always, the Lord would have you live each day not fretting about what you can't know, but holding fast to what you do know. You know that God is not your enemy: He has shed the blood of His own Son to make it so. You know that the battle is not lost: it's been won since Calvary, and you're on the winning side. You know that the world doesn't like that very much and so it's going to pick on you, but you know that Christ has overcome the world.

And you know that, whatever the New Year brings, nothing can separate you from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus your Lord; because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen