

Jude 20-25

Pentecost 27 (Proper 29B) + November 28, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Blameless

The Word of the Lord from Jude 24-25: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

Our Gospel lesson this week continues Mark 13, where Jesus talks about what to expect before the end of the world. A lot of what He has said in that chapter makes for somber meditation: wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters like earthquakes and famines, not to mention false teachers and persecutors of the Church. It's sobering stuff: it isn't easy to be a Christian in a dying world, because you're automatically in the crosshairs of the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh. All three of these enemies will make it their special mission to convince you that being a Christian is such a great burden that it's not worth it. These enemies are lying, of course: a pure heart and a good conscience are never a burden, but sin hates purity – purity of any kind. One obvious example is that we live in a world that seeks to convince people, who seek to preserve their virginity until marriage, that such purity is a burden and a shame. In fact, it is anything but; yet you know how destructive sexual sin is in our world today. Now consider this: if evil launches such a campaign against purity of body, you can bet that it's going to be even more hostile to purity of soul.

Given such evil, it's going to be difficult to be a Christian until the Lord comes again. The short epistle of Jude doesn't shy away from this truth. In the first sixteen verses, he warns against false teachers, sexual immorality, idolatry, blasphemy and other sinful desires. All these things attack faith and look to destroy your soul. It's a formidable array. It's enough to make you weep and despair.

But then come the last few verses, most of which you heard in our epistle reading. Let me read to you the three verses that come immediately before (17-19): "But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, 'In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.' It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit."

There are two vitally important points in those verses for the Church in these last days. First of all, the troubles of this world should come as no surprise because Jesus and His apostles said it would be so. The many pressures upon the Church, the many attacks upon Christians and the Christian faith, only confirm that the Scriptures are true. If Christians and the Church were coasting through life as the most popular people in the world's eyes, it would mean that the Word of God was false when it said to expect trouble. In the Old Testament as Israel was busy rejecting God, there was often a tension between true prophecy and happy prophecy. When Jeremiah prophesied the truth about the fall of Israel, he was threatened with death for upsetting the people. But the mark of a true prophet is not that his prophecy makes people happy, but that it comes true. So it is with all of God's Word: the troubles of this life are what He said would happen. You can trust the Word about trouble, which means you can also trust His Word about salvation.

The second point of these missing verses is that it is sin that causes divisions. Christians and congregations who seek to speak the truth of God will always be accused of causing divisions: we could all just get along as one big, happy family if you stopped saying that some beliefs and behaviors were wrong, after all. This should ring strange in our ears, because it declares that everybody is unified when everybody is ... left to do their own thing. Nevertheless, the argument about divisive Christians gets repeated so often that we start to believe it, so we must take a deep breath and clarify: it is not Christians who divide, but sinners. See, God's Word is ultimately what unifies, because it is truth. Those who are unrepentant for their sin have already caused the division by departing from God's Word. In remaining faithful to Scripture, we do not seek to cause divisions. We seek to heal them. We would all people united together in Christ – in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. We would have all set apart from sin and brought together by grace; and not just for now, but forever.

That's the faith and the hope and salvation that you already have. So in the epistle, Jude reminds you of the rich treasures you have. You're built up in the most holy faith: you're not trying to work your way into God's favor, but God already says that He favors you. You pray, and you pray with the certainty that God hears your prayers because you pray in the Holy Spirit; and even when you don't know what to pray, the Spirit is at work on your behalf.

Jude goes on to tell you that you keep yourself in the love of God. If you keep yourself in the love of God, it means you already have God's love. I cannot emphasize enough what a treasure that is. The world doesn't know God's love, but it knows its sin. Because it doesn't know God's love, it's terrified of Him because of sin. You don't live in that dread, because you know God to be merciful for the sake of Christ. And because you know of God's love in Christ, says Jude, you're able to endure these days. You confess your anxieties and worries and doubts and impatience, waiting for the mercy of the Lord to deliver you to heaven and trusting that you're God's instrument for good in this world until then. Knowing that you're God's instrument, you are merciful to others: you are merciful to those who doubt, because they are in need of the assurance of God's grace. We speak the Gospel so that they might be assured and snatched from the fire. And to others, we show mercy by preaching the Law against their garments stained by the flesh, so that they might be holy and without blemish by repentance and forgiveness on the Last Day.

You are God's hands and voice of life in a dying world. The world will make you feel like a divisive freak for faithfulness. Ah, but that isn't your life as a Christian at all. Given new life in Christ, you're like one who walks through a prison, flinging open the doors and declaring to all, "You're set free in Christ! You don't have to be prisoners to sin and death anymore." Now, the curse of sin is so powerful that many of the prisoners will say, "There's nothing wrong with me! You're the problem – go away!" And when the chorus of prisoners sounds louder than you – and then your own sinful flesh joins in, you're going to be tempted to believe that they're right and you're wrong. It's going to be easy to stumble.

But though you will sin and doubt and stumble, the Lord remains merciful. Because of your sin and stumbling, the Lord has trudged to the cross and died for your sins. He is risen again and ascended into heaven to reign over all things for your good. He is present with you in His means of grace to forgive you so that He might present you blameless before Him in heaven. What a promise: after all the sins and stains and blemishes and scars of this world, He will present you blameless before Himself in heaven – a bride in white preserved and prepared for her wedding day, for the marriage feast of the Lamb.

Courage, my friends. You are blameless before Him even now, for He has borne your sins to the cross so that you might be His holy people forever. These last days will not last that long, and the glorious presence of God awaits you because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

So to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.