

Sermon for the 3rd Last Sunday in the Church Year – Matthew 24:15-28

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." None of us lives the ideal life. None of us has the glossy photo on a magazine cover: a perfect little home with a white picket fence, two cars in a spotless garage, a gourmet dinner on the table, 2.5 immaculate, well-behaved children, and an adoring husband or wife. Even the best things in our lives are less than perfect. We all suffer from the sin that is around us. We lock our doors at night. We avoid certain areas within the city. We try to not look the homeless man in the eye who stands on the street corner as we sit in our cars. We've all been afraid, and we've all be hurt.

We've also added our own sins to the mess. We were born in sin. Our broken, hurting lives show it. Our inability to discipline our children, our inability to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of our spouses are all directly related to our inborn pride. We want our own way, our own honor, and our own praise. We do seek an ideal, to be sure, but it's an ideal completely formed by our selfish prerogatives. And we come from a long line of prideful "idealists." Aaron and the Israelites knew that their life in the desert after their exodus from Egyptian slavery was less than ideal. What kind of a loving God would send His people into the wilderness to die of starvation and thirst? Furthermore, they wanted an 'ideal' god that looks like and acts like the other gods of their society. And God's stiff-necked people are still making calves of gold even today. Our human hearts continue to lead the market in their chief export of manufacturing idols.

St. Paul faced a similar situation in his day. The underlying question in the hearts of God's people was, "When will Christ return for us?" Many have already died and it's getting harder every day to be a Christian. Even today, we can be swallowed up in doubt. God doesn't seem to know and doesn't seem to care. So we must take matters into our own hands and produce retribution in our way. At one time or another, we've all been mean, we've all been cruel, we've all been wrong, and we've all been selfish. We've all cheated and we've all lied. We've behaved in ways that make our mothers blush. We were born in sin. We inherited the Old Adam, an impossible and inescapable burden. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. Wherever there is evil, wherever there is temptation, wherever there is trouble, there we are to exploit it, to tear down others and hurt them, to devour our enemies and opponents, to devour our friends and brothers.

But God tells us the end will come. We cannot hide from the coming judgment. We cannot stand upon our own works and dare God to judge us by them. We are certainly not immune from the tribulations and troubles of this world, some of which have been caused by our own guilt. Turn from yourself, from your ambitions and pride, from your desires and from your fear. Turn to the God of living mercy. Be a vulture drawn by the Blood of the Corpse on the cross, eager to eat the good fruit thereof. Was there ever evil, ever trouble, ever anything so wrong as the unjust execution of the Man born of a virgin? And yet, was there ever such unconditional love? Gather there! For the Jerusalem gallows are stained with the blood of the prophets, with the blood of murdered Abel, crying to the skies for justice. But they are silenced by the Blood of the Lamb spilt in the most unjust act of all time. That Blood makes pure and white the souls of guilty men, murderers and thieves. And the Father declares all of

them as pure as His only Begotten Son. The Body of Jesus crucified and raised is food for the righteous. For there in the heart of evil, in the depths of man's depravity, in the devil's most wicked hour, there was the Christ, the Son of Man making men His sons, standing in the breach for us, laying down His Life in fulfillment of His Father's will, putting to death death. That Corpse, slain from the foundation of the world, lives and is meat for His children. His execution is His glory. His scars are the badge of His holy, forgiving Office. His death is the birth of life and the sending of the Spirit.

St. Paul would remind the Thessalonians just as he reminds us today, "We do not want you to be uniformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep." Those who die in the Lord have gone early to the judgment. And those who have fallen asleep in Jesus are not dead. They are alive in Him even as He is most certainly alive. They have been spared the longer trial. Their journey is complete. They have come to the reward of those declared just by grace. Soon, we shall join them. Paul continues: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first." They will rise, perfected for life. They confessed the faith in this living death while on earth. They were delivered by the Sacrifice of the Innocent in their place, brought through death into life. Their bodies were laid to rest in the grave for a time, but not forever.

And then, immediately after they rise, all those who are still enduring in the flesh will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Their bodies, too, will be made perfect at the same instant as their souls. Their joy will be complete, for they will be with their Lord, their Savior and Redeemer, the Lamb of God, their heavenly Bridegroom, who takes away the sins of the world.

Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean thing? Who can bring life out of death? No man, that's for sure. But all things are possible with God. His mercy has determined to rescue men for the sake of His love. He brings a clean thing out of an unclean, an ideal family, holy men and women, pleasing to Him in every way, out of struggling sinners curved in on themselves. He forgives all sins. He makes all things right. He restores all things to perfection. Oh, the goodness of war, bloodshed, and fear! Oh, the joy of oppression and terror! Oh, the bliss of great tribulation and false christs! For these are the signs of the end. Our Lord returns! We have not been forgotten. We still have trouble and sorrow aplenty, but they will not last. For we are forgiven. We are loved. By grace, we belong to Him. The end of sorrow is near.

In these last days of deep distress, amidst the lightening and turmoil, the danger and pain, the suffering and broken hearts, let us rejoice in the Corpse who was made alive. Let us gather about as vultures who glide on the wind of redemption. Here, the Lord gives mercy in times of trouble. Here the Lord delivers from enemies and persecutors. Here, the Lord takes away all shame. Here, we shall not die, but live. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠