

Dies Irae

In the name of him whose Day is near and fast approaching, dear friends in Christ: Over the course of the church year, we have opportunity to consider many enemies of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. First and foremost there are temptations to sin in all its various forms. These lead people who are in the church to turn aside and preoccupy themselves with the fleeting pleasures of this world at the expense of their eternal souls. The other big threat is false doctrine in all its myriad forms, which undermines the truths of God and invariably leads people to place their hope of salvation in something other than Jesus Christ and him crucified. And between these two enemies of the Gospel, temptations to sin and false doctrines, we could devote all of our time and study and never exhaust the potential pitfalls that Satan lays out to ensnare us and rob us of the heavenly reward that our gracious God wants to give us.

And while this is true, as directed by the appointed readings for today, I want to address another insidious hazard to persevering in saving Christian faith. This one's a homegrown hazard. It comes from within us. And because it's so quiet and subtle, it often manages to sneak underneath our defensive radar screens and remain undetected. When it does, it has the potential to inflict upon its victims just as much damage as sin and false doctrine. What is it? It's complacency. It's that smug sense that "I've got the bases covered. My spiritual house is in order. My soul is secure. I can slack off now and take it easy."

It doesn't work that way. And by way of illustration, many of you are involved in agriculture, and most of those who aren't are only a generation removed from it: you grew up on farms. Can you imagine trying to run a successful farm operation with that kind of attitude? There's always something to do, isn't there? There's never an end to the tasks and chores that need to be done. And while you're working on one thing, ten other things that need to be done are being neglected. Their condition worsens over time, making it all the more necessary that you address them. We all know this. And we are speaking of things that only matter in the here and now. And yet, when it comes to our spiritual health and wellbeing – the things that will be the deciding factors in determining whether we spend eternity in the joys of heaven or the flames of hell – we have the tendency to do a quick self-check, size things up rather haphazardly, and pronounce, "Eh, to me everything looks good enough already; and if not, then there's plenty of time to get things done later. No need to rush. Nothing to worry about."

Why is that? I suppose one of the reasons may be the lack of a known deadline. I mean, with the farm, you know that if a particular task isn't performed by a certain time, the consequence will be such and so. So you make sure you get it done in time. With matters that pertain to the soul, we know what the *consequence* of being unprepared will be – there could be nothing worse – but we don't know the *when*. So when setting priorities with all the other things you have to do, it's tempting to take a chance and put off making sure that everything is as it should be on the spiritual side of the house.

And no doubt an even greater contributing factor is the misguided belief that the Lord is rather benign being who sits up in heaven above and looks down upon the goings on of the people below with a sense of amused curiosity. Sure, he's opposed to the same things that we are, like murder and kidnapping and world hunger; and one day he'll set those things straight. But he's okay with most of what goes on down here – especially with me and the way I live my life.

Nothing could be further from the truth. As a rule, we have no sense of how each and every sin that we commit, however small and insignificant in our eyes, is a stinking offense to the Lord, an act of open rebellion against him that grieves him deeply, and that stirs up in him a storm of righteous indignation and fury. We imagine that because he is merciful and longsuffering, not exercising his judgment in this age of grace while he waits patiently for people to turn to him in repentance, that he doesn't care, that our sin does not offend him, and that he's not burning with anger. And maybe as you sit and listen to this, you're thinking to yourself that I'm overstating the case. I'm not. As we read in the Psalm [90:11] earlier, "Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?" The Psalmist's point is that no one does.

It's funny: we all learned from Luther's Catechism in the explanations to the Ten Commandments, how "We should fear and love God so that do not do so and so ..." but the truth is that we have no sense of fear when we break his commandments. And I've even heard many well-intentioned teachers telling people that fear in this context doesn't mean fear as in trembling with fright. But that's not what Jesus said. He said don't fear those who can destroy your body, but cannot destroy your soul; rather fear the one who can destroy both your soul and body in hell. His point is that as a sinner you'd better be afraid of God and what he's going to do to you because you've offended him.

In today's Old Testament lesson we hear from the prophet Zephaniah. It's this very issue he's dealing with. The people of Judah, God's chosen nation, were living in this sense of smug complacency and security. We read that they are "arraying themselves in foreign attire" and "jumping over the threshold". It means that they were engaging in the sinful culture of the world around them, practicing pagan superstitions, and not living as what they were called to be: a people set apart, a nation holy to the Lord. They were just going along, minding their worldly plans to enrich themselves, with no sense of fear that the Day of Judgment was about to come upon them. They were complacent and saying in their hearts, "The Lord will do no good, nor will he do ill." That is to say, "God's happy with us just the way we are; he's going to leave us alone."

The prophet had news for them. Their world was about to come undone. The Day of the Lord was almost upon them. And it was going to be full of shock and awe for the unprepared. "A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom ..." Most of them ignored the prophet's warning. They went on with their business as usual.

But that didn't stop God's wrath from falling on them. They were surprised when that day came. They were destroyed. And unfortunately the vast majority of them died spiritually unprepared. I don't have to tell you what that means. But their destruction serves as a warning to us. For we know that the Lord has appointed a Day of Judgment. On that day this earth and everything on it will be laid bare. Everything done in secret will be revealed. It's coming. It's coming soon. And no, the Lord hasn't told us when, despite what false teachers like Harold Camping say. As St. Paul says in today's Epistle, that day will come as a thief in the night, when everyone is saying "peace and security". Everything's fine. God is in his heaven and all is well with the world – or at least it is in my world.

Is it really? This is the question that today's readings practically shove into your face. If the Lord returned now, this instant, would you be ready? Are you right now in the spiritual state you want to be when he comes? Is this how you want the Lord to find you? And you may be

thinking, “Well, Pastor, I’m sitting here in church. Yes, this is exactly how I want the Lord to find me.”

Listen, just because you’re sitting in church, doesn’t mean you’re ready; not by a long shot. There are a lot of people who sit in church every Sunday who are nowhere near ready for the Lord’s return. As a matter of fact, it’s precisely because they are congratulating themselves for being in church regularly while at the same time their spiritual houses are not in order because they are living in ongoing and unrepentant sin, that they are not ready. They imagine that by being in church they are paying their dues and making up for their sins, thus appeasing the wrath of God. Friends, that doesn’t appease God’s wrath. It only makes him angrier.

So, here’s what it is: knowing our weaknesses and our tendency to be complacent and think that in a spiritual sense we’re okay just as we are, and knowing too that in the past a whole lot of people who thought the very same thing weren’t ready and were caught unaware, this is all the more reason for us to focus our attention on what it really means to be ready for that Day and to ensure that at all times we are properly prepared.

How do we do that? It begins by recognizing who we are: sinners, called out of the darkness of this world and into the light of Christ. We are children of the Day – of *that* Day in particular: the Day of Judgment. That’s the Day we are to live in every day. We are to live as if every “today” is that Day.

What do I mean? Just this: the coming judgment is going to be a day of God’s wrath. The Scripture is emphatic about that. But for those of us who are in Christ, the Day of God’s wrath is a past event. It’s already come. As Zephaniah foretold, “the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests”. The prophet was speaking about the Lord Jesus and his death on the cross. This is the sacrifice Jesus prepared and offered for us. On that Day, the Day of his crucifixion, the wrath of God against our sin was poured out on him. He suffered the judgment of God for us.

But that Day, and the forgiveness Christ earned for us by shedding his innocent blood, becomes a present reality for us every time we rightly fear God’s wrath, confess our many sins, and turn to Jesus in trust – trust that by the wrath of God he endured for us in love our sins are atoned for and our guilt is taken away. This is what it means to be children of the Day: to be living always under the protection of the cross and shed blood of Christ.

And it’s an ongoing thing. Like the work on a farm, the job is never done. In this fallen world while you still have a fallen nature, if you are breathing then you are sinning – and that means you need to be confessing and trusting in Christ. The mistake is to let up. In today’s Gospel, the parable of the talents, it’s the two servants who were actively pursuing their master’s interest who remained in his favor. They stayed busy doing their Lord’s will. It was the one who thought he was doing all right just as he was and did nothing with what he had been given who was cast out.

So, with all of this in mind, let’s stay awake, let’s stay spiritually sober, let’s stay busy – busy living in that Day: the Day of God’s wrath, the Day of our atonement when Christ our Lord suffered and died for us. And not only for ourselves, but as Paul says let’s encourage each other also, and build each other up in holy faith, so that when the Day of God’s wrath falls upon this world, together all of us may receive the salvation God has prepared for us through our Lord Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!