

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
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**“The Apostles’ Creed,
Part VII”
Psalm 37:8-14
Matthew 13:24-30**

**Pentecost Sunday
May 20, 2018**

Psalm 37:8-14

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming. The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose way is upright.

Matthew 13:24-30

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

“The Apostles’ Creed, Part VII”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today we are continuing in our series on the Apostles’ Creed. The end is in sight, for today we finish the articles concerning Jesus Christ. Last week we discussed what it means for Jesus to ascend to heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father. Like the Disciples before us, we too can rejoice in our temporal and earthly separation from Christ because we know he is in heaven reigning over us as King and interceding for us as Priest. But Jesus does more than reign and intercede. He also acts as Judge. Today, we’ll discuss what it means to confess *from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead*.

The atmosphere of the New Testament reveals a strong sense of expectancy. An expectancy for God to complete what he has begun, to consummate what was inaugurated by the advent of Christ. Redemptive history did not end at the cross or at the ascension. There is still a future work of Christ. Though he ascended, Jesus left us with a promise that he would one day return. This promised return is not going to be like his first advent. Christ is not going to be reborn as a babe and repeat what happened in the Gospels. No, his promised return is one that will usher in the eschaton. The eschaton is the theological understanding of the end times. When Jesus comes again, his Second Coming represents the end of the world as we know it.

For many Presbyterians, this talk of the end times makes us uncomfortable or suspicious. The thing is, apocalyptic literature is interspersed throughout both the Old and New Testaments. You can find them in the prophets, especially Ezekiel, in the histories, especially Daniel, and in the epistles, especially Revelation. While the language and the metaphors are scriptural, these visionary documents are cryptic and allegorical, and quite often are cumbersome for even the most highly skilled biblical scholars. So it is with good reason that we Presbyterians are leery of diving too quickly and too deeply into apocalyptic literature.

That being said, it is something that we cannot ignore. Like in everything, there are extremes in interpretation on either end of the spectrum. A hope for an imminent return of Jesus has sparked a vast number of fanatical sects and frantic behavior. Doomsday prophets appear in every generation. We are neither the first, nor will we be the last, to witness people pitching their tents on some remote hillside or taking up post on a street corner screaming “The end is nigh!”. Now that’s one extreme. The other is equally dangerous. Because of the stigma around the end times prophecies, many churches and preachers woefully neglect a *sober investigation* into future hope. To ignore the eschaton and eschatology — the study of the end times — is not only a detriment to our religious experience but is an outright sin of ignoring the very words and commands of the Word made flesh. Jesus did not shy away from talking about his Second Coming. The Apostles did not shy away from talking about the Second Coming. Neither should we.

One of the most extensive teachings on the end times comes from Jesus’ conversations with the Disciples on the Mount of Olives. There he spoke of things to come. Including the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70. In Matthew 24:3, the Disciples ask for more information from Jesus, like when will these things happen and how will they know. Questions that plague us today. He tells them that they will hear of wars and rumors of wars, famine, earthquakes, false prophets, apostasy, astronomical wonders, violence, and immorality. These signs point to actual events. Yet, all of those calamities are things that occur in every generation. When the earliest Christians were being persecuted by Rome, they thought the end was near. When the wars of the Reformation broke out, many thought the Second Coming was nigh, with both Luther and Calvin calling the pope the Antichrist. And today, we see it in the news with all this upheaval in Israel; wanton violence within our schools; the degradation of morals and integrity. Every age thinks the end is just around the corner. And every age, thus far, is proved wrong.

Now don’t hear me wrongly. Jesus himself said we will not know the hour. The possibility of Christ’s return may well be just around the corner. Jesus speaks of signs that appear in every age, yet in our day they seem more frequent. A sober analysis does not rule out that maybe we are in the final throes of the world. Or it may be another 1,000 years or 5,000 years. We don’t know. But Christ himself said to be weary of people who say they know, beyond any doubt, that the end is here. I tell you, be weary of them. Paul says to regard such prognostications with suspicion. For no one can predict the day or hour. When that day arrives, we will know it. The Bible tells us that there will be a loud sound, like that of many trumpets. Christ himself will descend from the

clouds, just as he ascended. Everyone will see it and everyone will know what it is. Right now, it is dangerous to read too much into the wars and violence and earthquakes. Having said that. It is equally hazardous to read too little. The reason why Jesus describes his Second Coming like a thief in the night is because the majority of folks won't know it's here until they see him coming in clouds descending. But those who do know, those who trust and believe that Christ will one day return, they will not be taken by surprise.

This is the thing about the eschaton that I want to drill home. Because we don't know the hour, and because so-called "signs" appear in every age, our responsibility is to be vigilant and expectant. Not to the point of abandoning all hope, selling your possessions, and camping out. Not to the point of raising false alarms. Paul chides the Thessalonians for thinking that way. Instead, we are to live our lives prepared for Jesus' return. Our relationship with God and our relationship with our neighbors out to be rightly ordered, so that when the moment comes, we can look to heaven and say, "Yes Lord, I am ready." That's the road the Christian ought to take. We are to steer clear of the extremes of false predictions and ignoring Christ's promised return, but to stay in the narrow path of anticipation and hopefulness.

But we must not lose sight of our study this morning. The Apostles' Creed doesn't stop with Jesus' return. Not only do we believe that he ascended to a specific place for a specific purpose, but we also believe he will return to a specific place and for a specific purpose. Thus, we assert that Jesus will come *to judge the quick and the dead*. Just a word about the language. "Quick" is an old term used to describe living things. So we believe that he will come to judge both the living and the dead. Both those who are alive at his coming and those who have died long before. We'll talk a little more about the living and the dead when we get to the article about the *resurrection of the body*. For now, I want to focus in on Jesus' role as judge.

Our New Testament lesson this morning is Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds. Another good parable about his role as Judge is the parable of the sheep and the goats. Both of these parables describe the separation of one kind from another, but each is talking about a different sphere. The parable of the wheat and the weeds is talking about the church. Within the visible church are those who proclaim a Christian faith and are certainly adopted children of God. But also within the church are those who are not part of God's household. They may perform the same movements, say all the same words, and know all the same hymns, but they are not regenerate Christians in that they have not responded to God's effectual calling. Now, I can't not talk about the wheat and the weeds without mentioning the two types of calls.

The first call is the external call of the Gospel. "Christ Jesus died for your sins, and his resurrection from the grave won for you a victory over death, so that you may be a co-heir with him of the Kingdom of God. Do you believe and trust in this good news?" That's the external call of the Gospel. Now the thing about that call is it very easily can go in one ear and out the other. Or it can easily bounce off these walls and fall flat on the ground. You don't have to respond to that external call. The second type of call is the effectual call of God. This is an inward call spoken by the Spirit on the hearts of individuals. When God makes that call, it cannot

be ignored. You cannot say “no” to God. You can say “no” to me. You can say “no” to the evangelist at your doorstep. But no one can say “no” to God. But the thing is, just like you can say “no” to me, I can’t look in your heart and judge your relationship with God. You’ve heard the external call. I invite you to look within your heart, and can you say beyond any doubt that you have responded to God’s call on your life? This is a perfect opportunity to reflect and listen with ears to hear.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds shows us that when Christ returns as Judge, he will separate out those who are not his followers from those who are. But notice what’s going on. Jesus does the judging. Not me. Not the elders of the church. Not the Pope or the Baptists. Only Jesus. Does this mean we should throw teaching and reproof to the wind? Of course not. We are still called to live in right relationship with God and with our neighbor. We are still commanded to piety: in studying the Bible, praying for self and neighbor, praising God in community, spreading the Gospel message, and obeying his laws. We are still commanded to charity: in caring for the least, pursuing justice for the oppressed, liberating the captive, and standing firm against unrighteousness. This is where the parable of the sheep and the goats comes in. God will separate out those who obey his commands from those who do not.

And who are we to suggest to Jesus, “Lord, you need to step aside and let me sit on the throne because I’m better equipped to judge.”? Who would raise a hand and demand to be counselor to the Judge? Preposterous! But this is precisely what we do when we pronounce other Christians holy or unholy. When we, as humans, judge our fellows, we are usurping a role that does not belong to us. Calvin was very adamant on this. While we should indeed teach and reprove, we are not to do the weeding out. That is not our responsibility. That’s not the pastor’s responsibility. It’s not the elders’ responsibility. It’s no Christian’s responsibility to play the part of judge. For all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. We are servants of Christ. In serving him, we are to serve each other, even washing the dirty feet of our brothers and sisters. Who here is able to perceive the motives and purposes hidden within the deepest recesses of the heart? The churchgoer who seems so humble in his deeds may actually be driven by a raging fire of pride. The pastor who seems too quiet to be a leader may actually be a fervent spiritual warrior.

Because the most intimate of knowledge is hidden from our perception, Paul tells us, “Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” To confess that Jesus shall come to judge the living and the dead, is to believe that even in the darkness of this world, we can live anticipating the *light* of his judgment. This anticipation is not morbid but filled with wisdom. We are not motivated to live for the approval of those whose opinions are neither healthy nor absolute. And we remind ourselves to refrain from judgment as we are neither sovereign nor omniscient. And only you can respond in faith. I can’t do it for you. The church can’t do it for you. Only you know if God is in your heart. Thankfully we have helps. We are not left alone to wonder whether or not we are saved. We have God’s Word. The Bible exposes our innermost sins, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, cleans out that dirt. The Bible also commends and encourages us as we reflect on God’s glory in the darkness of this present age.

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One day a final reckoning will occur, and God's Word will surgically remove all residue of our sinful nature. That is the day we should ever keep in mind, and we should live, even now, in its light.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we know that this life will one day come to an end. For many of us, death will be our final experience. But there will be a generation that will witness the return of your Son, our Savior. Certainly, that final day will be a fearful time. But that day will be more sweet than any previous, for on that day there will be no more sin as we live in communion with you, O God, restored, renewed, and set free. Stir within us a desire and yearning for that union with you, so much so that we model our very lives today to imitate your goodness and mercy. Holy God, I ask that you call out today with the call that invites us to turn to you. And if there are any here who have not responded to that call before, I ask that you open their hearts to receive you. Until you return, help us to be your disciples, loving you with our whole selves and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. It is in the name of Jesus our Savior that we pray. Amen.