**Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

**November 14, 2021**

**Text—Daniel 12:1-3**

 My dear friends, we are getting close to the end of the church year. The season of Advent begins two weeks from today, and we will then turn our attention to the coming of Jesus and preparation to celebrate Christmas. But first, we have these final two Sundays to get through to complete our current church year. If you’ve been in the church for a while, you’ll know that these Sundays are typically reserved for talking about the end times: the imminent return of Jesus Christ and everything that will happen leading up to that. That’s why all of our readings for today have a distinct end times flavor to them.

 For the next two weeks, our Old Testament readings are going to be taken from the book of Daniel, which gives us a great opportunity to do a little two-week miniseries on that book. Daniel is a book that we’re usually very familiar with and somewhat unfamiliar with at the same time. Daniel tells the stories of several Judahite exiles who were brought to Babylon after the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem. These young men were among the best and brightest of the people of Judah, so the Babylonians brought them back to Babylon so they could serve the empire with their talents. The names of the four men we hear about in Daniel were Daniel himself of course, and then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Those names all probably conjure up images of some very memorable Sunday School lessons back in the day. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were the ones who refused to bow down to the image of King Nebuchadnezzar, and they were thrown in the fiery furnace as a result. But God protected them from harm, which vindicated their faith in him and greatly impressed Nebuchadnezzar. And then Daniel was the one who continued to pray to the true God even after it had been forbidden, and he was thrown into the lion’s den. Again, God protected Daniel from harm and showed that Daniel had put his trust in the right place. So these are the two stories we have heard many times from the book of Daniel, and for many of us, they probably make up the extent of our familiarity with it.

 But Daniel is not just a book of inspiring stories about God’s protection of those who remain faithful to him. The first half of the book is like that, but the second half is completely different. The second half of Daniel mostly consists of visions that God gave to Daniel throughout his time in Babylon. These visions are strange, and quite frankly, parts of them are a bit disturbing. This section of Daniel is basically the Revelation of the Old Testament: it’s apocalyptic literature, with all of the odd symbols and numbers and images typically associated with that genre. The text that we are considering today comes from that second half of Daniel, as does the text that we will look at next week. Thankfully, though, these two texts are actually a bit easier and more straightforward than some of the other stuff you find in Daniel. Still, they do present to us some interesting images, ones that are worth discussing at length. When we peel back all the layers and get to the heart of what these texts mean, we’ll find that they are not scary, but rather encouraging and comforting to us Christians who eagerly await the return of our Lord Jesus.

 So to start off with, we have this text from Daniel 12. As a reminder, these verses occur in the middle of God speaking to Daniel about what is going to happen in the end times. God starts off by saying that at that time (or the time of the end), Michael, the great prince who has charge of Daniel’s people, will arise. This first statement bears some analysis. The name “Michael” means “who is like God.” This does not mean that Michael himself is like God; rather, it is simply the question, “Who is like God?” The answer to that question, obviously, is nobody, and as such Michael’s very name points to the glory of the God who created him.

 But who exactly is Michael? What is his role? Well, he is a great heavenly prince, what we might refer to today as an archangel. He is not just any old angel, but he is an archangel, one who is more powerful than most of the others and occupies a highly significant place in God’s heavenly court. And his task, according to this text, is to have charge over Daniel’s people. This means that Michael is the “guardian angel” of the nation of Israel, the one whom God entrusts to protect Israel from all of its enemies. And remember, because we Christians today belong to Jesus Christ, we are now members of God’s chosen people of Israel. We are not Israelites by birth, but we are Israelites by faith in Jesus. So when God says that Michael is the prince over Daniel’s people, he’s talking about us Christians as well. Michael commands the angel host to fight for us, to make sure that we are not overwhelmed by our spiritual enemies of sin, death, and the devil. Had God not sent Michael to protect and guide us, we would be lost and totally vulnerable to the attacks of our enemies, but with Michael’s protection, we remain safe and secure under the reign of the Lord.

 And that’s a good thing too, because as the text says next, there will be a time of trouble. The text describes this time of trouble as one that has never been since there was a nation until that time. So basically, it will be the worst time of trouble on earth since the great flood in the days of Noah. The text from Daniel doesn’t say what exactly will happen, but there are other texts in the Bible that do. One of them is today’s Gospel reading from Mark 13, in which Jesus talks about the kinds of things that will happen during the tribulation. He describes wars, natural disasters, and persecution against the faithful. This time of trouble will be dangerous, frightening, and generally unpleasant for everybody, especially for Christians. It will not be a great time to be alive in this world. But, as the text also says, at that time the people of God will be delivered. The time of trouble will not be the final word for them; they will make it through by the grace of God. Michael will continue to be with God’s people and see them safely through any trial and tribulation they experience.

 The text also says that everyone whose name is “written in the book” will be delivered. This is a reference to the book of life, in which the names of all those who will be saved have already been written. The image of the book of life can be somewhat intimidating for us, but it doesn’t need to be. We don’t have to wonder about whether or not our names are written there; we know they are because of our baptism into Jesus Christ. Our sins have been washed away, and we have been claimed as God’s children and granted faith in Jesus, which saves us from the wrath and judgment of God. As faithful Christians, we have received God’s promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ, and thus we have nothing to fear as we stand before him in judgment. Our names are written in the book of life, which means that we will be saved from God’s wrath, as well as from all of the troubles that will plague the earth as the end draws near.

 The text then goes on to say that those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awaken; in other words, the dead will rise again. On the last day when Jesus returns, he will sound the trumpet and awaken all of humanity that has died since the creation of the world. He will then bring them all to his glorious white throne and pronounce judgment upon them. Some will be granted everlasting life in God’s kingdom, while others will be consigned to everlasting condemnation with the devil in hell. Again, this image of Jesus passing judgment upon humanity can be frightening and intimidating, but it should not be for Christians! As I said before, our names are written in the book of life, which means that Jesus is not judging us according to our own works that we have actually done. If he did that, our sins would subject us to everlasting condemnation. But no, Jesus judges us according to his own perfect righteousness which he exchanged with us as he hung on the cross. He gave us his righteousness and took our sinfulness upon himself, and then he atoned for it by suffering, shedding his blood, and dying as a perfect sacrifice to God the Father. So when he judges us, he declares us to be perfectly righteous, not because of what we have actually done, but because of what he has done for us. We will not receive the shame and everlasting contempt that the unbelievers will, because through faith in Jesus we have been justified in God’s sight. On that last day, we will rise to everlasting life, an eternity in God’s kingdom that is a pure gift from the Lord.

 Finally, the text says that those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever. To be wise in this way is not to be smart or well read; rather, it simply means that you know Jesus, who himself is wisdom in the flesh. To know him is to be wise, and to reject him is to be foolish. So those who are wise, who trust in Jesus, will shine with a heavenly light forever, while those are foolish, who do not believe in him, will spend eternity in utter darkness. Similarly, those who turn many to righteousness refers again to believers, who have spent their lives proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and who have brought others to faith as a result of their witness. Those who have boldly held steadfast to their faith and refused to keep silent about it will shine like the stars in the heavens forever. Again, this is a promise from God to his faithful people that he will save them from all the distress they undergo in this life. If they remain faithful to him and trust in his promises, then they will indeed see the blessings of eternity in his kingdom.

 So then what does all of this mean for us Christians today? What should we take away from this text, especially as it relates to the end times? Well, there are two basic points that need to be made. First, the end times will indeed be difficult, and there will suffering for everyone, even for believers. God is not going to insulate us from the tribulation that will occur; we will experience it just like everyone else. In some ways, it might actually be worse for believers, because great persecution will be a part of these trials. The unbelieving world will attack the church, and all Christians will need to remain steadfast if they want to make it through with their faith intact. To some extent, all of these tribulations have already been occurring ever since Jesus ascended into heaven; this was why the apostles were so insistent that even two thousand years ago, the church was living in the last days. But even so, it will become more intense right before Jesus returns. We may be alive at that time or we may not be, but it would behoove us all to be prepared to experience the tribulation when it comes.

 However, the second point we take from this text ultimately makes the first irrelevant. The second point is that despite all of the suffering, all of the trials, all of the persecution that believers will undergo in the end, God will deliver us from it all. He will not allow his faithful people to be lost eternally; though we may die, we will rise again when Jesus returns. Jesus will not allow sin, death, and the devil to win the day; he will defeat them with his mighty power and banish them all to hell where they belong. And he has promised us that we will not join his enemies in hell; rather, we will be brought to everlasting life in God’s kingdom, where we will shine like the brightness of the sky forever. Our names are written in God’s book of life, so we know that no matter what happens to us here, God will make sure that we are safely brought through. By the power of his mighty angels in heaven, and especially by the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection, God will guard and protect his church until the final day. So we have nothing to fear as we contemplate the end times and prepare ourselves to experience them. Jesus has delivered us from the evils of this world and of the spiritual realm, and we Christians can simply look forward with confidence to the wonderful blessings of eternity spent in our Father’s kingdom. Amen.