

*“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What would you consider the greatest day of your life? Each and every one of us would have a different day. For some it would be the day they were married. For others, it may be the birth of their children. Some might think of graduation day, or the day they began their dream job. For athletes and Olympians, it could be the day they won a world championship or a gold medal. That got me thinking about the great days in history. What would they be? Of course, historians and pundits have their own opinions. Most look not only at great days, but at days that have a major impact on history. That is why many see the beginning of World War I and WWII as important days, but the ending of those wars as great days. Some will mention the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Others will think of the day the printing press was invented or the day that the first nuclear bomb was dropped. I saw one ranking of dates of historical importance where the birth of Confucius and the birth of Buddha were more significant than the birth of Christ. As the people of God, we should know that the greatest of all events in history is actually a bit of trinity of events, because they all relate together: the birth of Christ, the death of Christ and the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. These days, even though they are not important to so many in our world, are truly the greatest days in all of human history.

There is another day that holds great joy, promise and hope for us. On this last Sunday of the church year, we look forward to the day when our Lord and Saviour will come again, revealing to all mankind His victory over sin, death and the devil. We look forward to the day when He brings an end to the pain, the suffering, the struggle and the death of this world. We look forward to the day Jesus promises in our Gospel lesson: *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.”* (Matthew 25:31, ESV) That day is coming, and what a day it will be!

Since the day when Christ left this world to ascend into heaven, promising to return, the church’s prayer has always been *Maranatha*: Come quickly, Lord Jesus. I think that prayer takes on an even more urgent reality when we see the terrible evils all around us, and wonder how long things can go on this way. More than anything else right now, we wonder, we worry and we fear what COVID-19 can do. Yes, there are some lights at the end of the tunnel, as two potential vaccines are showing promise and may soon be made available. Yet those vaccines are not a cure, and they are not a guarantee. We know our own struggles as a congregation in trying to determine what the coming Advent and Christmas season will be like in our socially distanced society. We see it all and we ask, “How long, O Lord?” We see the indifference that so many people have towards the suffering of others; that indifference like the ‘goats’ in our Gospel lesson who ask, *‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’* (Matthew 25:44 - ESV), and we wonder, “how long, O Lord?” We see the incomprehensible evil and the unspeakable horrors of this world broadcast on the news, and we wonder, “How long, O Lord?”. We face the futility of life in this world, and the sad reality of death, and we wonder, “How long, O Lord?” Job said: *“Man, who is born of woman, Is short-lived and full of turmoil. “Like a flower he comes forth and withers. He also flees like a shadow and does not remain.”* (Job 14:1-2 - NASB) Is life just a move from one struggle to the next, with little glimmers of hope thrown in, until that day when we leave this mortal existence in death?

I wasn’t always the most sympathetic when my children complained about how tough their lives were, especially when I knew they really had nothing to complain about. I would simply remind them that life is tough, and then you die. This is what sin has brought into this world. This is what our own sin brings to our lives. As Paul said in our Epistle lesson today: *in Adam all die* (1 Corinthians 15:22 - ESV) We, like Adam, have that sin that brings us far short of God’s glory. It keeps us from the blessings

that He has prepared for us. It leads us to be part of the evil that we see in this world. And it brings forth the judgement that we deserve before an all-holy God. Worse than the ‘hell on earth’ that so many dread, is the terrible reality of eternal death in hell, and of being cut off from God and His grace forevermore.

Yet in the midst of all the hopelessness that so often does exist in this world, we hear the wonderful promises of our God in our text today. Ezekiel was called by God to serve as a prophet while in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem had been pillaged by the Babylonians, and the king and the brightest and best had been carried into exile. This was the time of Ezekiel’s ministry. Sadly, he must continue to proclaim God’s judgement against a stubborn and unfaithful people. The city of Jerusalem would fall. The temple, which so many trusted in as the sign of their covenant as the chosen people, would be taken away. But even as these things happen, Ezekiel was also given a great message of hope and comfort, such as the wonderful words of our text today. God doesn’t forget His people. Rather, Ezekiel declares: ***“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”*** Throughout this text, we hear God speak of what He will do for His people. He will rescue us. He will provide for us. He will protect us. He will give us rest and peace in His glorious pasture. He will destroy all our enemies—even our greatest enemies of sin, death and the devil.

Even as we face the struggles of our lives, we look to all that God has done, is doing and will do for us as His people. Jesus assures us that He has come to do what Ezekiel promises. He declares that ***“the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*** (Luke 19:10, ESV) Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who ***“lays down his life for the sheep.”*** (John 10:11, ESV) On that cross, so long ago, God came to rescue us from all the evil, the rotteness and the uncertainty of this world. He does not leave us without hope, but rather gives us a sure and certain hope. It is the hope that Paul speaks of in our Epistle lesson—the sure and certain hope of the resurrection through the firstfruit resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the promise that Jesus gives to His people in our Gospel lesson: ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”*** (Matthew 25:34, ESV) There is so much in this world that can overwhelm us, but all the futility of this world loses its power over us when we remember what God has promised and what God has prepared for us.

When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation to take us home—well, what a day that will be! Even though we die, our bodies will rise at the command of God, and this perishable flesh will be imperishable. This mortal, sinful body will know the fulness of Christ’s redemptive grace. And we will be alive in the presence of the Lord forevermore. In heaven, we will know the best, and only the best, forever. God Himself has promised in the words of our text: ***As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness... I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.***

Even as we struggle through so much of the uncertainty of life, we have this one sure and certain hope: our God has redeemed us. Christ died for us and lives for us. He has taken away what Adam brought upon all mankind. He is with us in our struggles and will bring us safely home. That is why Paul tells us in the verses after our Epistle today: ***“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:58, ESV) Baptized into Christ we go boldly to face whatever this world brings, confident of the victory that is ours. We face the hatred of an unbelieving world, for we know that the battle is won for us. No matter how dark the days may be, we look forward in joy to the day when the trumpet will sound, and the Lord will say to His faithful: ***‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*** (Matthew 25:34 - ESV) Yes, what a glorious day that will be for those who trust in Christ, the day when we declare with all the hosts of heaven: ***“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:57, ESV) Amen.