

*“Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples. My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Perhaps you have heard the expression, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life”. That quote is attributed to Charles Dederich, who was the founder of Synanon, a self-help community for drug abusers and alcoholics. In the context of dealing with addiction, there is something to be said about encouraging people not to be trapped in the past, but to look at each day as a fresh start, as we seek to move forward. There is also a spiritual truth to this, found in the promises of our Baptism. Luther teaches us in the Catechism: *[Baptism] indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.* (SC, Baptism IV)

Yes, today is the first day of the rest of your life. When most people think about that, they also realize that there is a termination date on every life. We may live 80, 90, or even 100 years or more, but life in this world will come to an end. That has always been true for every person (well, with the exception of Enoch and Elijah), and it always will be true. The mortality rate will remain at 100%. Yet for us, the end of this worldly life is only the beginning. Even as we think of the end of the world, we know that it only ushers in the glorious age of the Messiah. We have a hope that goes beyond this world, a hope that Jude speaks of in our Epistle, as he reminds us: *“But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”* (Jude 20-21, ESV)

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. All of our lessons speak of the last things, the end that we know is coming as we confess in the creeds: *“He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end.”* (Nicene Creed) Our text tells us that *the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner.* Jesus speaks of the last days in our Gospel lesson, telling His disciples: *“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”* (Mark 13:24-26, ESV)

On the one hand, it sounds like a very distressing, ominous time. For those who deny, defy and despise God, the last days are nothing but fear, judgement and eternal damnation. But even as we look to the end, we see something different. We see that grace that God speaks to us in the words of our text today. We see His promise to us through all the words of Scripture, including all our lessons today. To quote Yogi Berra, the well known catcher for the New York Yankees, we know that *“It Ain’t Over ‘Til It’s Over”*. How blessed we are to know that even as the end comes, for us it is only the beginning of a glorious, blessed and peaceful life with our Saviour and Redeemer in His wonderful, eternal Kingdom.

While the whole of Scripture is all about Christ, there are few places that tell us such wonderful truths about Christ as does the prophet Isaiah. We will soon be reading those wonderful prophecies that point us to the birth of Christ, and the blessings that His coming brings to the whole world. Our text follows a section in which Isaiah has declared that the people have lost their righteous standing before Yahweh. They have chased after false gods. They were sent into exile because of their unfaithfulness. That could have been the end. Yet God, in His mercy, promised deliverance and salvation. That deliverance is declared in our text today. It is the assurance that God has not, nor will He ever, forget His people. As He says through Isaiah: *my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.”*

Oh, how we need that glorious hope in these days! With all that is happening today, we wonder how long the world can endure. A young mother is accused of throwing her infant child into a dumpster, but defends herself by saying that the child was dead

before she threw him in. We are still dealing with the fallout of the residential school crisis. Kyle Rittenhouse, the teenager who killed two people and shot another during unrest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, is acquitted in a verdict that has further polarized an already polarized America. Riots and unrest follow the verdict. We are all fed up with all that COVID has done, but I pray we don't see what has happened in the Netherlands as rioters clash with police over COVID measures. More and more we see a world where we live only for ourselves; we live in accordance with our own personal view of right and wrong. We may see efforts to show care and concern for those around us, but there is a selfishness and apathy that has put our world on the verge of anarchy, on the verge of lawlessness and disorder. Is this the end?

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus reminds us that ***“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*** (Mark 13:32, ESV) We may not know when, but we know it will come. When the day of the Lord does appear, it all comes to an end. Again, as Isaiah says: ***for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner.***

But Isaiah doesn't leave us to fear that day. Yes, the end will come, yet for those who trust in Christ the end is only the beginning. Even in the face of all the terrible things we see in this world, God is at work for the sake of His redeemed. God says to us: ***“Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples. My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait.***

God has sent His Word into the world. Isaiah speaks of God's *Torah*, which is translated as Law. We hear that word and think of the books of the law—the books of Moses that bear that title. Yet the word *torah* has a wider sense of what we would call both law and gospel. This law serves as a light for the people. When Isaiah speaks of light, he often refers to the Saviour, who says to us: ***“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*** (John 8:12, ESV) The law—the commandments themselves—don't bring light and hope. That comes from the promise of deliverance that His Torah brings.

God also promises: ***My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out.*** In our office devotions, we read the words of Jeremiah, where God declares that He will raise up for David a righteous branch, and that: ***“In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”*** (Jeremiah 23:6, ESV) Jesus is the righteousness that draws near. He is the Salvation that has gone out. He is the One ***“who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy.”*** (Jude 24, ESV) He is the One who makes the end of life or the end of the world only the beginning for His people. He is the One who allows us to endure these days and to face the coming days with confidence and hope. Today is the first day of the rest of your life because you are the baptized child of God. By the word and promise of God with that water, you were united into the Righteous One. You were covered with the Lord of your salvation. His death on the cross becomes your death to sin. His life and resurrection become the guarantee of your life forevermore. We can say, “I am baptized. I am washed in the precious blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away my sin. I am alive and will live in the Saviour who destroyed death, hell and the grave through His resurrection. Even as the end draws near, whether for my life or for the day when this heaven and earth will pass away, I know that end is only the beginning. I will be with Him in the glory of a life that will never end. I will know peace and joy that passes all our understanding. I will be with all the saints, in the rest and celebration of heaven's glory.”

On this last Sunday of the church year, we are reminded that the end is near. Yet we always have the hope that is ours in Christ, that faith in Him assures us the ending is really only the beginning. We lift our eyes to heaven, as Isaiah encourages us to do, ***waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*** (Jude 21, ESV) What joy is ours to know that in Christ the end is only the beginning of our joy forevermore. Amen.