

**“With Longing Eyes We Wait For Your Second Coming”**

More than 600 years before Jesus was born, God’s prophet Zephaniah testified that the great Day of the Lord was near and coming quickly. Nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus himself stood on this earth and spoke with his disciples about that day. He told them to be ready for it and to keep watching for it. And even the last words of Jesus recorded for us in Scripture, words spoken to his apostle John in a glorious vision, speak about that day. He says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

These are just three among many references in Scripture to the Last Day, the day when Jesus will come to earth in a visible and physical form for the second time. Just these few examples remind us that this is an important and significant event. This is something we should be thinking about and remembering. This is something that should have an effect, a profound effect, on our lives.

But it doesn’t always have an effect, does it? How often do you really think about that fact that Jesus will come back and that he says he is coming soon? How often does the fact that Jesus is coming back soon affect your day or your plans or your decisions or your behavior? At this time of the year, we tend to focus on Christ’s return in a number of ways and at various times. We did so in sermons and services dealing with End Times, we’ve done so in sermons and services already during the Advent season. But doesn’t it often happen that we sit in church and think about the Last Day, and then we go home and don’t really think about it anymore?

I suspect that is one of the reasons that Scripture repeats its message about the Last Day as frequently as it does. I know that this tendency for so many of us is one reason why our midweek service today asks and invites us to give still more attention to that event. We just sang the hymn that gives us our theme for a series of three Advent midweek services this year, “Jesus, Your Church With Longing Eyes.” We sang, “Jesus, your church with longing eyes for your expected coming waits.” And we do. Christ’s church waits with eager anticipation, with longing eyes, for his promises to be kept and his prophecies to be fulfilled. Christ’s Church does so whenever its people, by God’s grace, overcome their sinful natures and raise their eyes to the truth that is so hard to see in the midst of a sin-darkened and sin-stained world. And so today we join with the Church throughout time and throughout the world to say, “With longing eyes we wait for your second coming.” And we pray that God would help us to do so. Please listen as I read the words of our sermon text, portions of the prophecy of Zephaniah found in the first and second chapters:

The great day of the Lord is near— near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry. <sup>15</sup> That day will be a day of wrath— a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness— <sup>16</sup> a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. <sup>17</sup> “I will bring such distress on all people that they will grope about like those who are blind, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like dung. <sup>18</sup> Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord’s wrath.” In the fire of his jealousy the whole earth will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth. <sup>21</sup> Gather together, gather yourselves together, you shameful nation, <sup>2</sup> before the decree takes effect and that day passes like windblown chaff, before the Lord’s fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord’s wrath comes upon you. <sup>3</sup> Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.

As we look to the Second Coming of Christ with longing eyes, we must first pray that God would help us to recognize how imminent an event it is. We must pray, “Help us to know that it is coming soon.” Zephaniah says as much. The day is near, near and coming quickly. He speaks with an urgency and an immediacy. He speaks in striking picture language about that day, using some of the most vivid images concerning it found throughout all of the Bible.

In fact, along with Joel, Zephaniah is the prophet whose prophecy is almost entirely wrapped up in speaking about this “Day of the Lord.” Other prophets speak about it at one point or another, but move on to other issues as well. Zephaniah, like Joel, dwells on the Day of the Lord. And he drives home the fact that it is coming soon.

So what does “soon” mean? When you and I say “soon,” we aren’t talking about thousands of years in the future. That’s not soon to you or to me. That is beyond a lifetime. And so many have therefore assumed that God’s promises are worthless. His assurances are unreliable. He says soon, but the day never comes.

Peter in the New Testament speaks about such impatience and denial. He says about those who follow their own evil desires, **“They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation”** (2 Peter 3:4). God hasn’t given us a precise timeline. He has given us a warning and an encouragement: It is coming soon. Be ready. Always be ready.

In one way, the Day of the Lord has come for many already. No, Jesus has not yet returned to earth, but many have reached the end of their time of grace. They have exhausted the time that God has given them to come to faith in him. Their fate is already sealed, even if it is waiting to be fully revealed on that final day of judgment. When many Old Testament prophets like Zephaniah speak about the Day of the Lord, their prophecies encompass not only the great and final day of judgment, but also other times when God threatened and worked judgment. According to Zephaniah, Old Testament Israelites would see the Day of the Lord when other nations would conquer and destroy them, carry them into captivity and rule over them. They would see in these events the working of the Lord’s judgment. And these events would serve as reminders, as prototypes of the great Day of the Lord that was still to come.

We don’t know whether we will be alive to see the glorious return of Jesus, or whether he will raise us up out of our graves to be a part of that day. But one way or the other, the Day of the Lord will come soon for us. It will certainly come soon from the perspective of eternity, from God’s perspective. The one to whom a thousand years is like a day and a day like a thousand years has not deceived us in saying that the day will come soon. He wants us to know the urgency of that day.

But what exactly will that day bring? It is our prayer also that we would know the answer to that question. “Lord, help us to expect your justice and your grace.”

At first glance, this text might seem a horrible one for encouraging us to look with longing eyes toward the second coming of Jesus. Why would we look with longing eyes on **“a day of wrath—a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness”**? We wouldn’t want to dwell on the distress and the terror that Zephaniah’s words invoke. We would want to pray, “Help us avoid this!”

But have you ever looked around at the injustice in this world and hoped for justice to be done? Have you ever looked at what people get away with and wish that someone would give them what they deserve? Have you ever suffered through the scoffing of non-Christians and anti-Christian people and wanted God to make that stop? That’s what God wants, too! The Day of the Lord will bring God’s justice to bear. He will allow those who have rejected him to receive what they deserve. And all the injustices done will be dealt with.

But where does that leave us? We are not always right in our assessments of others. We know far too well that we have not lived up to God’s perfect standards in any part or aspect of our lives. The Day of the Lord as a day of justice should be terrifying to us, as much as it will be to anyone else.

But Zephaniah has an answer: **“Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.”** Now is a time for repentance and for change. Now is a time to heed the warnings and to look to God for his grace. These words which close out our sermon text are not Zephaniah’s last words about God’s grace. They’re just a little sneak peek at the rich grace that God promises, even in light of the Day of the Lord. In the third chapter of his prophecy, Zephaniah proclaims: **“Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel...the Lord has taken away your punishment...Do not fear...The Lord your God is with you.”** For God’s people, the Day of the Lord will be nothing but joy. It is a final step of his gracious plan, set in motion with a promise the moment our first parents fell into sin. It is why Jesus came to earth the first time as a little baby. It is why he comes to us in his Word and sacraments. This is why he will come again: to bring us to be with him forever in heaven, to make our rejoicing complete. This is God’s grace, that he has punished Jesus for our sins so that he can give us Christ’s righteousness and holiness.

We will continue to talk about the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming of Christ from year to year, and even more than that, because the Bible talks about it repeatedly and demonstrates its importance for us. May we always look to that day with longing eyes, longing for the day of our deliverance, a day for us that will be joy and gladness.