

Proper 28 (November 16, 2014)

“The Day Is Surely Drawing Nigh” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #508)

It’s coming! It’s coming! The Day of the Lord is coming!

We confess our Lord’s return in the creeds. We read about His returning again in the Scriptures. We sing about His return in many hymns and we pray “Maranatha”, “Come, Lord Jesus”.

The Lord’s Day —that Day. That dreadful day. The text of this hymn (based on the Latin hymn *Dies Irae*) paints a most depressing picture of the Last Day; the Last Judgment when God will return to judge the world. The imagery of the first lesson, Zephaniah 1, proclaims nothing but doom, gloom and destruction—think heaven and earth in ashes burning.

Zephaniah was a young prophet who preached and prophesied during the reign of a young king Josiah—the king who found the lost Book of the Law in the temple. The people of Judah and Jerusalem had steeped themselves in paganism, and wandered away from the LORD and His ways. They had forgotten the Law; wealth and self- sufficiency had become their gods. Zephaniah spoke against this and prophesied of the coming of the Lord’s dark and destructive Day of Judgment. There would be a complete destruction of creation; a divine declaration against the nations. All creation would be undone. The world would be plunged into darkness and war. The people would be cut off.

The Book of the Law – divine judgment - Day of the Lord - day of wrath – destruction. The thought of these things brings despair and hopelessness. The end of all things is near. The end, not only for Judah and Jerusalem, but for us, too. The end of all things. The end of us.

BUT – we know the end of the story.

We know the end of the book of Zephaniah. The book concludes with a call to singing! A renewed Judah and Jerusalem rejoices. God’s judgment concludes with the vision of a delightful future where God Himself will reign.

We know the end of OUR story.

Our story is the same as the people of Zephaniah’s time. We have all gone our own way. We have no claim to right living in God’s sight. The Law condemns us all. As Luther states: *In the end we are all beggars*. But thanks be to God—through our Baptism, God gives us the gift of grace and forgiveness. Through Jesus death and resurrection our names are now written in the Book of Life. God has said “no” to death. Death does not have the final word. Our story ends in rejoicing!

Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!

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The day is surely drawing near when Jesus, God's anointed,
In all His power shall appear as judge whom God appointed.
Then fright shall banish idle mirth, and flames on flames shall ravage earth
As Scripture long has warned us.

The final trumpet then shall sound and all the earth be shaken,
And all who rest beneath the ground shall from their sleep awaken.
But all who live will in that hour by God's almighty, boundless power,
Be changed at His commanding.

The books are opened then to all, a record truly telling
What each has done, both great and small, when he on earth was dwelling,
And every heart be clearly seen, and all be known as they have been
In thoughts and words and actions.

Then woe to those who scorned the Lord and sought but carnal pleasures,
Who here despised His precious Word and loved their earthly treasures!
With shame and trembling they will stand and at the judge's stern command
To Satan be delivered.

My Savior paid the debit I owe and for my sin was smitten;
Within the Book of Life I know my name has now been written.
I will not doubt, for I am free, and Satan cannot threaten me;
There is no condemnation!

May Christ our intercessor be and through His blood and merit
Read from His book that we are free with all who life inherit.
Then we shall see Him face to face, with all His saints in that blest place
Which He has purchased for us.

O Jesus Christ, do not delay, but hasten our salvation;
We often tremble on our way in fear and tribulation.

O hear and grant our fervent plea: Come, mighty judge, and set us free
From death and every evil.

Text: Bartholomäus Ringwaldt, 1532-99; tr. Philip A. Peter, 1832-1919, alt.

Tune: ES IST GEWISSLICH, *Geistliche Lieder auff's new gebessert*, Wittenberg, 1535, ed. Joseph Klug.

The text comes from the Latin sequence, *Dies Irae Dies Illa* – “Day of the Lord – that day”, a day of wrath. *Dias Irae* is a famous 13th cent Sequence, probably by Thomas of Celano, a Franciscan monk. Originally an Advent hymn, it became the sequence for the Requiem mass.

Tradition has it that Martin Luther wrote this tune after hearing it sung by a traveling artisan. The tune is from the 15th century and was associated with secular text. The hymn was sung often during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) when the people were convinced that the Last Day was at hand.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded or printed for local use.]