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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Pentecost 23

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, I want to begin this sermon by introducing a word that may or may not be familiar to us.

The word is parousia, spelled P-A-R-O-U-S-I-A, parousia.

Now, this word parousia in the time of Jesus referred to the coming of an important dignitary.

Indeed, when the Roman emperor made tours through the Roman Empire...

When the emperor visited the provinces to make his presence known to those on the fringes of the empire...

When the emperor came to evaluate the well-being of the empire in these out of the way places...

When the emperor toured the empire, his visit would be greeted with fanfare.

The emperor would be greeted with celebration wherever he went.

Indeed, wherever he was headed, those places would make all sorts of preparations to receive him.

Preparations in form of festivities and food.

Preparations in the form of accolades and honors.

Preparations in the form of street repairs, so that his arrival would be smooth and pleasant.

Such details should make us think of those passages in the Bible that speak about Jesus' coming, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his path straight."

Yes, when the emperor was approaching a city or town, it was called a parousia.

And a parousia is defined then as “a presence, an arrival, an official visit.”

And it is this word, this concept that is taken over by early Christians so then to describe the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ arrival, his official visit at the end time is called “The Parousia.”

PAUSE

And we are at that time in the church year now...

We are at the end of the church year...

And so our readings lend themselves to discussing the Second Coming.

Thus, in our reading from 1 Thessalonians, for instance, we read about Jesus’ coming from heaven.

We read in 1 Thessalonians, “The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air.”

PAUSE

Now, this sounds like God is going to come and collect all believers and take them back up into heaven.

But this is actually not what is going on here.

When the reading says, “Believers will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,” what the text is saying is that believers will meet the Lord and accompany the coming Lord on the rest of his journey to earth.

Yes, this is how a parousia worked in the ancient world.

When the emperor or some important dignitary was making their way to a town or village, people would go out to meet the individual and would form then part of the entourage accompanying the dignitary.

The whole mass of people would then journey together the rest of the way to the town or village.

When I was young boy, my brothers and I would experience a similar experience when our cousins came to visit.

I am one of four boys, and my dad's sisters, my aunt and her husband had three daughters.

And it was always a big deal when my cousins would come to visit from the Pittsburgh area, we live in Philly, so it is not like we saw each other all that much.

But it was a big deal for me and my brothers, when my cousins came because we experience then the novelty of what it was to have "sisters."

And my brothers and I would play outside waiting for my cousins to arrive and we would meet their car at the end our driveway, because we were that excited to see them.

This is the vision of a parousia in ancient times, when the citizens of a village or town would go out to meet a dignitary as they approached.

And this then is the vision in 1 Thessalonians.

The believers are caught up in the clouds to accompany the Lord the rest of the way to earth, for it is on earth where Jesus will reign eternal as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

This is the vision of the parousia.

And it is the same sort image we see in the gospel lesson about the bridesmaids and bridegroom.

PAUSE

You see, the custom in Jesus' day was for the female friends of the bride to wait outside the bride's house.

The bridesmaids would wait for the coming of the bridegroom.

And the bridegroom would then come from his own house to get his bride and take her back to his own house for the wedding ceremony and celebration.

And, the bridesmaids would wait outside the bride's house for the bridegroom to come.

And then as the bridegroom approach, the bridesmaids would go and greet him.

And the bridesmaids would then escort the bridegroom and bride through the streets to the groom's house, all the while celebrating along the way.

This is the image we have in our Gospel.

It is another sort of parousia.

It is another sort of arrival or official visit.

PAUSE

Now I share all of this with you, because we ourselves are the bridesmaids waiting to greet the bridegroom as he approaches.

We ourselves are the believers who wait to see the Lord descending on a cloud, so that we can be caught up with the Lord.

We ourselves are those who await the great dignitary as he comes to visit.

Yes, we are those who are waiting, anxiously, expectantly, for the coming of the Lord.

We are waiting for the parousia.

PAUSE

But our waiting is not a sit on our hands and do nothing kind of waiting.

Our waiting is not a lay around and be idle kind of waiting.

Our waiting is not, "Okay, so now what do I do," kind of waiting.

No, our waiting is purposeful. Our waiting is meaningful. Our waiting is active.

Our waiting is like those who go out to meet the Lord, the dignitary, the bridegroom, as he is making his way.

And what I mean by that is this...

We are to be engaged, we are to be working, we are to be announcing the advent of God.

We are to be making inroads for God's presence to be revealed, for God's arrival to be made manifest, for God's official visit to be known.

What I mean to say is that our God is coming, God's coming should be evident in our lives, his coming should be evident in the world.

Preparations are to be made.

God is coming, and God's coming should be plain, it should be apparent, it should be obvious.

But, we don't make street repairs to get ready for God's arrival.

And, we don't prepare foods and festivities to welcome God's visit.

And, we don't prepare speeches where we will honor God with accolades.

We don't do anything of those things like we would for some dignitary.

God is coming, and we prepare and we go out to meet God in a different way.

Instead of preparing festivities, foods, speeches, and roads...

Instead, we prepare for God's coming by making known that which God brings to this world.

We prepare by making ready that which God brings.

God is coming, and God's coming for instance brings justice to the world.

And so how we go out to meet God is by making manifest the justice of God in the world right now.

God is coming, and God's coming means justice, and so strive for justice ourselves.

And that is how we go out and meet God.

And that is why then we have been conducting a Racial Justice Forum so as to say that God's justice is coming and we are preparing inroads for God's justice to reign here on earth.

We are seeking ways to develop relationships with people who are our brothers and sisters, but who's skin color is different.

We strive to make inroads of justice because God's brings justice, and so we are going out to meet God.

God is coming and God's coming also brings peace.

And that is why we take time out to recognize our veterans and all who serve in the military on this Sunday in November.

Because our men and women in uniform serve to maintain peace in our nation and wherever they serve in the world.

Our military are making inroads for God's peace to reign here on earth.

And that is why people serve, to make inroads of peace, because God will bring a peace that surpasses all understanding, and this then is how we go and meet God with visions of peace.

God is coming and God's coming brings hope.

Which is why then we gather here on Sunday mornings week-in and week-out.

We come together to acknowledge that hope we have in Christ is alive and well.

We come together to proclaim that we have not lost hope.

We come together to make inroads for God's blessing of hope when the Lord comes to infuse all the world with hope.

God is coming and God's coming brings health and healing.

Which is why there are medical personnel on the frontlines during this pandemic doing everything they can to care for the sick and the dying.

Whether the medical personnel realize it or not, they are making inroads for God's kingdom where there will be no more sickness and no more death.

God is coming and God's coming brings new creation.

Which is why we see firefighters out in force trying to stop the ravages of forest fires out West.

Which is why we see disaster response teams going to places hard hit by hurricanes.

Which is why scientists are working diligently to figure out how we can reduce carbon emissions into the atmosphere, and how we can capture the carbon that is already out there.

All these people are working to make inroads for God who will usher in a new creation.

We are a people who are waiting.

But our waiting is not inactivity. Our waiting is not passiveness.  
Our waiting is not idleness.

No, our waiting is an excited waiting, such that we can't help to go out to meet the Lord, and make inroads for God's arrival.

PAUSE

Our waiting is an accompanying with, it is a going with, it is an travelling with God, who is coming.

We Christians do not travel on a cloud up into heaven and desert the planet earth.

No, we Christians travel with God, as God journeys the rest of the way here.

So light your lamp, sound the trumpet, heed the archangel's call, and let us go out, let us go out and make inroads for the Lord and God Jesus Christ, that he might arrive, and arrive soon.

Thanks be to God. Amen.