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

Sisters and brothers in Christ, in the early church there was the expectation that Jesus' return was imminent.

In the early church, Christians believed that Jesus' return was near at hand.

Yes, early Christians thought that Jesus' return was well within sight, that it would happen within their very lifetime.

Jesus had died and he had been raised.

And Jesus had ascended into heaven.

But Jesus would return in the very near future.

And with the return of Jesus, the kingdom of God would break into this world in all its fullness.

That was the assumption. That was that expectation. That was the hope.

We hear this expectation in our reading from 1 Thessalonians, where Paul prays that the Lord may strengthen the hearts of the Thessalonians in holiness that they may be blameless before God at the coming of Jesus Christ with all the saints.

We hear this expectation as well in our reading from Luke, where the gospel writer says, "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Furthermore a passage in Matthew's gospel makes it abundantly clear, that early Christians thought Jesus would return very soon.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus himself says, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

So, the early Church subscribed to this notion that Jesus' return was imminent.

But then it didn't happen. Jesus did not return within the time frame of those first generation Christians.

Indeed, today we still wait patiently for the return of Jesus Christ.

Two thousand years later we are still waiting for Jesus to return.

And some of us might be wondering, "What is up with that?"

Why has Jesus not returned?

Why is Jesus delayed in coming?

And there are all sorts of explanations.

Jesus hasn't come yet, because God is biding his time so as to allow as many people as possible come to faith.

Jesus hasn't come yet, because a thousand years is but a day to God, and so what seems like a long time for us is but a blip on God's time table.

Jesus hasn't come yet, because the signs which warn of Jesus' coming begin, but then the countdown somehow gets disrupted, and the cycle of signs has to start again, and this has been happening over and over.

So on and so forth.

There have been all sorts of explanations about why Jesus is delayed in coming.

There are all sorts of explanations about what is keeping Jesus.

Personally, I have no idea.

Personally, I don't know why Jesus hasn't returned yet.

I don't have a good answer to give you.

God is God, and God will do what God is going to do.

But whereas some might say that the delay of Jesus' return is just proof that this whole Christian thing is bogus, I am not willing to go there.

I am not willing to wager a guess about the reason his delay.

Martin Luther said something similar with respect to this, that is, that some questions are best left unasked.

In a book called *Table Talk*, it is recorded that Luther was once asked, “What was God doing before he created the universe?”

To which Luther replied, hopefully a tongue a cheek response, “Before creation, God was busy creating hell for inquisitive spirits.”

In other words, don’t be so inquisitive.

So in answer to the question, “What has been keeping Jesus?” we might reply, “Don’t ask. Don’t be too inquisitive.”

PAUSE

Instead of focusing on the question of what’s keeping Jesus, our Lord would no doubt prefer we focus on what we should be doing in the interim.

And what is that?

What is it we should doing in the interim as we await the coming of Jesus...

What is it that we should do, but focus our attention on the signs.

For there will be signs, we are told.

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.

There will be signs on earth, distress among the nations, and signs in the roaring of the sea and the waves.

There will be signs like earthquakes, and famines, and war or rumors of war.

There will be signs that include perhaps a worldwide pandemic.

There will be signs that include perhaps a warming climate with horrific effects on the weather.

There will be signs that include perhaps various people who are stuck at the border between nations, signs of people trying to gain access to a better life.

There will be signs that include perhaps supply chain disruptions, shortages in goods and products, and a jump in inflation.

Signs, signs, and more signs. Pay attention to the signs.

But why is it that all these signs convey bad news?

Why is the heralding of Jesus' coming accompanied by bad news?

The heralding of Jesus' coming is like watching the news on television, which constantly broadcasts sensational, disturbing stories that serve to ratchet up our anxiety and our anger.

Why is that? Why is Jesus' coming foretold with a barrage of bad news?

I won't deny it, but I find this troubling.

I find it troubling that the gospel writer Luke plays to our fear and anxiety, not unlike the television news with which we are bombarded.

So instead, I encourage us as people of faith to pay attention to other signs during this interim time.

I encourage us to consider the other signs that are out there and in here (point to the heart).

Signs like compassion and mercy which people demonstrate toward each other.

Signs like good will and generosity which people exhibit in this holiday season.

Signs like grace and love which people express through their words and actions.

These are the signs that herald God's coming.

These are the signs that tell us God's power is already at work in the world, is at work already in us.

Compassion and mercy, good will and generosity, grace and love—these are the signs that give witness to the power of Jesus, these are the signs that reveal how God's people are living out God's will.

These are the signs that God's people are doing what they are supposed to do.

And to do what we are supposed to do is to reveal that God's kingdom is breaking in around us.

PAUSE

It is like that fig tree in our gospel lesson today.

Jesus says, "You know when summer is coming. You can see it in the fig tree."

“You know summer is coming because the fig tree sprouts leaves, as a fig tree is supposed to do in preparation for the coming season of summer.”

“You know summer is coming, you can see it. You can observe it. You can behold it with your own eyes.”

“You know summer is coming.”

So how difficult is it for us to know that Jesus is coming, that the kingdom of God is coming?

You can see it. You can observe it. You can behold it with your own eyes.

But it is not the signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, which tell us of Jesus' coming.

It is not the signs in the earth, nor the signs among the nations, nor the signs in nature or the weather, which announce Jesus' coming.

It is not the signs in the economy, nor the signs in politics, nor the signs of anything else out there, that proclaim the imminent return of Jesus.

No, Sisters and Brothers in Christ, it is the signs that emanate from here.

It is the signs emanate from our hearts that truly herald the coming of Jesus.

We are the signs of our Lord's coming, if we choose to live as the people of God.

PAUSE

So the reading from Luke today leaves me a little uninspired.

The reading from Luke just doesn't do it for me.

I struggle with Luke's way of playing on our fear and anxiety.

When talking about what heralds Jesus' coming, I feel more inclined to heed the words of our Psalm today.

And in that Psalm we hear the Psalmist directing a plea to the Lord.

The Psalmist is asking for help so that he or she might live up to whom God made him or her to be.

Like a fig tree that instinctively, naturally produces leaves, so the Psalmist wants to do what he or she should instinctively, naturally do, as a creation of God.

In short, the Psalmist is asking God to make his or her life a sign of the coming kingdom.

Listen again to these words of the Psalmist...

Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation: in you have I trusted all the day long.

Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.

Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; remember me according to your steadfast love and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.

You are gracious and upright, O God; therefore you teach sinners in your way.

You lead the lowly in justice and teach the lowly your way.

All your paths, O Lord, are steadfast love and faithfulness to those who keep your covenant and your testimonies.

PAUSE

Wow. Are those words not wonderfully powerful?

Are those words from that Psalmist not all about seeking to be a sign of God's coming kingdom in Jesus Christ?

Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.

In you have I trusted all the day long.

All the day long, trusting in God, learning from God, walking in his paths, and doing his will.

Doing mercy and kindness.

Revealing love and tenderness.

Glorifying God and his Son Jesus Christ.

And being, being a sign.

To watch and wait then for the signs of Jesus' coming is nothing more than looking at ourselves and asking ourselves if we are an example of God's grace in the world.

And if we can respond to that question saying, "Yes, I am an example of God's grace in the world," well then the coming Jesus has already arrived.

Jesus has already arrived and he is alive and well in your heart and in your life.

And we rejoice and we sing out in thanksgiving.

Be alert then, Friends, at all times, for Christ is coming, has already come in fact.

He has come upon you to teach you his ways and to show you his paths.

Thanks be to God. Amen.