

Daniel 12:1-3

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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Time of Trouble, Time of Grace

The Word of the Lord from Daniel 12[:1]: “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The end of the world is coming; and before it comes, it’s going to get worse. That’s the announcement of our text for this evening: “there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.”

“A time of trouble, such as never has been.” That’s a remarkable statement. Just consider the book of Daniel by itself. The prophet Daniel was an Israelite in Babylon—not by choice, but by force. He was taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar, who conquered Jerusalem. That was hardly an overnight victory: he besieged the city for nearly a year and a half before it fell, the people inside dying of starvation and flirting with cannibalism. Whatever ancient warfare lacked in killing efficiency, it more than made up for in gruesome brutality.

Daniel’s life was far from an easy one in Babylon. Though elevated as an advisor to Nebuchadnezzar, he was sentenced to death for refusing to bow down to false gods. The execution was planned for cruelty: he was lowered into a den of hungry lions.

He was not the only one to suffer in this short, 12-chapter book of the Bible. There were also the three young men—Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. They also were condemned to death for refusing to bow down to false gods; and once again, the death was designed to send a message—burning in a fiery furnace.

Those are just a few examples from the book of Daniel. Throw in the defeat and captivity of the northern ten tribes by Assyria, and the picture becomes far worse yet. Then consider the barbarity of the Romans when they destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the persecution of Christians in the first few centuries after the Ascension, the long list of genocide of all sorts of groups throughout history, and you’ve got a very unpleasant picture of history and humanity.

And it’s going to get worse, says our text, such as never has been.

Of course, all that we’ve described so far doesn’t mean the end. Hear our Lord from the Gospel lesson for this day, from Mark 13[:7-13]:

“And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will

be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

In other words, the wars and examples of brutality that history records, and which we see in our present time, are not guarantees that the end is near at hand. They are simply the sorts of things that are going to keep happening in a world where sinners reject Christ and life, instead worshipping self and death.

Meantime, our text says it's going to get worse just before the end. This is also confirmed in Revelation 20:7-8.

But what does "worse" mean?

Could it be in the form of worldwide violence, bloodshed and death? Could it be mass starvation, viral pandemics or swathes of humanity cut down by nuclear weapons? Could it be a worldwide campaign to exterminate Christians? All of these are other possibilities. The continued growth of fanatical Islam should give us pause, though as Christians we address Islam with the Word of God, not prejudice or violence. Where militants draw the sword—or detonate the nuke, we give thanks that God entrusts Caesar to punish the evildoer. But it is given to the Church to proclaim salvation in Christ from false gods and religions, Islam included. Terror attack is, perhaps, the threat closest to our consciousness at present, though there's lots of potential for war from several nations on several fronts. Could this indicate the end? Maybe. Maybe not. There will always be wars and rumors of wars until the end.

There is another possibility about what "worse" means—not a growing loss of human life, but of life in Christ. In other words, "worse" could very much indicate a time where the world continues much as it does today, but more and more people simply reject the Good News that Christ has died for their salvation. It could conceivably, I suppose, point to a time where wars are few, the world is largely at peace, but there is little Christianity left to be found, few believers left who put their trust in the Lord. After all, when the Lord warns about the end of the world, He especially warns of the "abomination of desolation." This is not a prophecy of a nuclear wasteland, desolate so that none can live. The Lord is speaking of the desolation caused when His grace is absent, when His Word is no longer preached and His sacraments no longer administered. The Lutheran Confessions, in fact, declare that the "abomination of desolation" is "ignorance of the Gospel," and this makes a lot of sense. As Christians, despite the threatening things in our world that our eyes see, we acknowledge this to be far worse: the Christian in Iraq with al-Qaeda operatives outside his door is in far less danger than the unbeliever sipping a mocha at Starbucks—because in the big picture, he has eternal life.

So what can you conclude about "worse," this "time of trouble, such as never has been"?

You can conclude that this world is a dangerous place. You can confess with the Lord's Word that sin leads men to all sorts of evil, both physical and spiritual. You can be absolutely sure that the end *could* be near at hand. Or not.

If you're not careful, you'll also draw conclusions that the devil whispers in your ear. He will, most of all, try to convince you that all the trouble you see is proof that the Lord is unfaithful and His Word is wrong; and it is tragic when people fall prey to this temptation and see it as reason to leave the faith, because such tribulation only confirms what God says about the sinfulness of man. But Satan is usually far more subtle along the way: he will plant such thoughts in your mind when you suffer deep, personal tragedy—when you suffer a personal time of trouble such as never has been. You and I have a limited amount of compassion: when someone suffers far away, it is easy for us to accept the tragedy as “how the world works;” but when it is given to us to grieve a personal loss, it is then that we start to wonder if God is still up the task.

In the meantime, the devil settles for fear. If he can't get you outright to think that the Lord is unfaithful, he will fill your mind with such anxiety, fear and depression so that you find it very easy to forget about God's promises to you. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus tells the disciples, “Do not be anxious.” In trouble, you will hear that as Law. You will hear it like a grouchy parent yelling at an upset child, “Stop crying and man up!” You'll start to think that the Lord will not help you until you do the work of being less afraid, until you do the work of trusting more.

But the defeat of fear doesn't start with you and what you can overcome. The defeat of fear is accomplished by your Lord Jesus Christ, and He shares that victory with you. We spoke before of Daniel in the lion's den, just one of many of man's calculated cruelties. But we've not yet noted in this sermon that Daniel was delivered. He emerged from that pit the next morning with the proclamation, “My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me...” (Daniel 6:22).

We mentioned the three men sentenced to die in the fiery furnace, but we've not yet mentioned the end of the story. They survived. They were delivered, and when the king looked into the furnace to observe their fate, he said, “Look! I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God” (Daniel 3:25).

Though those three men were condemned to death, the Son of God was present with them to deliver them. Though Daniel was supposed to die, God sent His angel to deliver. That angel could well have been the pre-incarnate Christ—just like the “great prince Michael” in our text is almost certainly Jesus Himself.

The Good News of our Old Testament lesson is this: in the midst of the only-getting-worse-troubles of this world, the Lord remains present with His people—present to save. Remember again our Gospel lesson, where the Lord warned of all sorts of trouble and apostasy and sin. All of this is rebellion against Him, His Word and His holiness. And yet there He was, become flesh like you, to go to the cross and die for your sins. Risen again, the Savior who warned of all that trouble also said to His disciples, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Risen and ascended, your Savior says to you, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” He says to you, “Take heart, for I have overcome the world.”

So your Savior is with you. Your great prince has charge of you, for you are numbered among His people. He joined you to Himself in Baptism and wrote your name in His Book of Life. He feeds you His own body and blood in His Supper, to strengthen and preserve you far past this violent world unto life everlasting. And while headlines still blare the wickedness and atrocities of this world, He keeps on saying, "Take heart, My forgiven child, for I have overcome the world."

Our Old Testament lesson is certainly not without this hope. It tells of growing trouble, yes. But it also promises that in that "time of trouble, such as never has been," the Lord will deliver His people, "everyone whose name shall be found written in the book." It promises that He will raise those who have died in the faith to everlasting life. It promises that those who hold fast to the faith will "shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

Whether or not the end of the world is near, this is of comfort to you and me; because if the world continues, our end is near. None of us here tonight have more than about 60 years left in this life. Should the Lord tarry, your end will come—and it is quite likely that it will be preceded by a time of trouble such as never has been since there was a you. But while you must still face death one day, you are not alone.

Your Savior says to you: "I am with you always, even to the end of your age."

He says, "Take heart, for I have overcome the world."

He says, "I will deliver you, for I have written your name in the book, and I will raise you up to everlasting life."

He says you will shine with holiness and righteousness forever.

Of this, you can be most sure, because the One who has overcome the world for you declares to you that you are forgiven for all of yours sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen