

**ARE WE READY FOR THE DAY OF THE LORD?**Sermon for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2017

Amos 5:18-24

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today in the First Reading from before, Amos 5:18-24 **How horrible it will be for you who are longing for the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It will be darkness, and not light.** <sup>19</sup> **It will be like a man who runs away from a lion, only to have a bear confront him. It will be like a man who goes home and rests his hand against a wall, only to have a snake bite him.** <sup>20</sup> **Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, rather than light? Will it not be very dark, with nothing bright in it?** <sup>21</sup> **“I hate and I despise your feasts. I cannot stand the stench of your festive assemblies.** <sup>22</sup> **Although you offer burnt offerings and your grain-offerings to Me, I shall not accept them. I shall not accept favourably the peace-offerings of your fattened steers.** <sup>23</sup> **Take away from Me the noise of your songs! I shall not listen to the music of your harps!** <sup>24</sup> **Rather, let justice flow like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus warns in our Gospel today that many who are invited to share in the eternal joy of His kingdom will miss out by failing to have a living

faith at the end. Though some will be condemned for heinous crimes and gross sins, many more will fail to enter heaven simply because they neglected their faith.

There are some people who are waiting for the return of the Bridegroom – that is, Christ – who won't be ready when He comes, and it's important that we see this. We are not talking about unbelievers, pagans and so on – those who are outside of the Church. No, we are talking about people who, along with the others, *are* eagerly anticipating the coming of the Lord. They *think* they'll be going into the wedding feast along with everyone else, but the problem is that their preparations have been inadequate. When the Bridegroom comes, they wake to discover that they haven't got any oil to keep their lamps of true faith burning. And no one who does have it can give it to them.

When we confess the Creed, we begin by saying: “*I believe*.” We do not say “*We believe*” because you cannot believe for someone else. God works faith through Word and Sacrament, and you cannot receive them for anyone else. They've got to get it for themselves. But by the time the foolish ones figure it out, their efforts are too little, too late. They stand at the door begging for admittance only to hear Jesus speak the dreadful words, “*Truly I tell you, I do not know you,*” (Matt. 25:12).

So just who exactly are these people who think they are prepared to meet the Lord and aren't? How can we be sure that we are not among them? In the parable of the ten virgins, it is obvious that the five foolish virgins didn't think they were unprepared, so, if they didn't think they were unprepared, how can we be sure that we are? What's the status of our oil supply? And how can we tell?

We can find some of the answers we're looking for by going to today's First Lesson from the book of the prophet Amos. There Amos is confronting a similar situation: people who are eagerly waiting for the

coming of the Day of the Lord and thinking that it's going to be a grand and glorious thing for them; but who are dead wrong about it.

Amos says to them, **How horrible it will be for you who are longing for the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It will be darkness, and not light.** And then just when the people think they have escaped from one calamity, another overtakes them. **It will be like a man who runs away from a lion,** (the lion represents their present troubles), **only to have a bear** (that is, the day of the Lord) **confront him. It will be like a man who goes home and rests his hand against a wall,** (meaning safety at last) **only to have a snake bite him** (God's holy judgment). **Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, rather than light? Will it not be very dark, with nothing bright in it?** The whole point here is that when the Day of the Lord comes, there will be no escaping God's judgment.

To better understand what Amos is saying, it's necessary to know to *whom it is* that he's speaking.

Amos lived during the time of the divided kingdom. After King Solomon completed his rule over all Israel, his son, who wasn't quite as wise as his father, managed to really mess things up. Whereas Solomon's rule was seen as the glorious golden age of Israel, his son Rehoboam seemed to want to usher in an age of oppression.<sup>1</sup> The ten northern tribes of Israel told him to forget it. They broke away from him and united to form their own nation under their own king Jeroboam with their capital in Samaria. That left the land of Judah in the south along with Simeon and a part of Benjamin, which later became collectively known simply as Judah, with its capital of Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 12, 2 Chron. 10

At first it seemed to work out pretty well, this northern alliance of tribes; but there were two fairly serious problems. The first had to do with worship. The law of the Lord mandated that all Israelites make a pilgrimage three times a year to worship the Lord in His Temple.<sup>2</sup> And here lay the problem. The Temple was in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was in Judah. Jeroboam feared that if all his people kept going back to Jerusalem to worship, it would only be a matter of time before they switched their political allegiance back there as well. So, to prevent that from happening, he decided to set up two alternate worship sites in the northern kingdom. They would be located at the extreme northern and southern borders of the kingdom. One site would be at Bethel. This was the place where Jacob had his vision of a ladder reaching to heaven.<sup>3</sup> It was located a mere 19 kilometres north of Jerusalem and sat atop a bare mountaintop. The other was at Dan.

At each of these two locations there was erected a golden calf. Perhaps it was reasoned that such a means of worship had been instituted by Aaron at Mount Sinai. In actuality, both Aaron and Jeroboam had borrowed this calf worship from Egypt where the sacred cow was the symbol of the goddess *Hathor*.

Jeroboam then told his people, “*You don’t have to go back to Jerusalem to worship. We have our own places right here. They’re closer and more convenient.*” And then, to really clinch the deal, he made worship up there more fun. They mixed in a few sensual pagan elements, got rid of a lot of that depressing talk about sin, bent a few of the commandments to make them easier to live with, and added a few

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 16

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 28:11-19

special holidays to spice things up. And for the most part, the people fell for it – or rather, fell into it, for it was surely a trap of devil. But let me say this: they only fell for it because they wanted to. Worship that’s easy and fun, and not so depressing – who wouldn’t want to be a part of it? A God who isn’t so demanding and who’s a lot softer on how people behave? Who doesn’t want that?

But there was another problem; and it had to do with the Messianic Promises. You see, everyone knew that a lot of prophecies about the Messiah said that when He would come, He would be a king in the house and line of David. And the kings in that line were ruling in the *southern* Kingdom of Judah, not up in the north. So there was certain feeling of *illegitimacy* about what Jeroboam and his people were doing in a political sense. So the way they solved that problem was to reinterpret what the Day of the Lord was going to be. What they said was this: *“Yes, we know that the Messiah will come from the line of David; but when He appears, we’ll know it. And at that point the ten northern tribes will reunite with our brothers in the south and we’ll be one big happy family again. But until that Day of the Lord comes, we’ll stay separated and just keep on doing what we’re doing.”*

The division of the kingdoms happened about one hundred and fifty years before Amos began his ministry. And so for that amount of time, for at least a century and a half, the northern Kingdom of Israel had been independent of the south and pursued their own aberrant religious trajectory. And what had started off by being a little more lax and unscriptural had only gotten worse. But this is typical. For example, any scandal that parents come to accept or at least don’t condemn as forcefully as they ought, soon become the rule and norm for their children. And the same can be said in the church. After a few generations of Scripture twisting and watering down, and the moral and

ethical degeneration that goes with it, there isn't much left. So in a spiritual sense, the northern kingdom was a cesspool. But don't think the people weren't religious; they were *very* religious. They worshipped, and sang hymns, and offered sacrifices; they had their special feast days – but none of it had anything to do with the Lord, or what He had actually revealed about Himself, or the way He wanted to be worshipped. That's why He said through Amos: **“I hate and I despise your feasts. I cannot stand the stench of your festive assemblies. Although you offer burnt offerings and your grain-offerings to Me, I shall not accept them. I shall not accept favourably the peace-offerings of your fattened steers. Take away from Me the noise of your songs! I shall not listen to the music of your harps!**

Of course, that's not what the people thought. They were very sincere about all that they were doing with respect to worship. They were just sincerely wrong about it. And they had what they thought was reason to believe that what they were doing was perfectly acceptable. They seemed to have the Lord's blessing: the economy was booming, wealth was pouring into the nation, and their enemies were weak and disorganised. It seemed to them that the Lord was smiling upon them and that a new golden age was just about to dawn – which made them think that the Day of the Lord was about to arrive. Things were so good they figured it could only mean that the Messiah was about to come and establish His kingdom – and then things would be even better.

That's why the Lord sent Amos to them. It was his job to adjust their thinking. “Yes,” he said, “*You're absolutely right. The Day of the Lord is about to come upon you; but it isn't going to be at all what you're*

*expecting. It will be for you a day of judgment and you will not escape.*"<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the religious leaders did not listen to Amos and would not repent. Not long afterward then, the Lord raised up a powerful enemy nation to execute His judgment. The Assyrians came in and quite literally wiped the kingdom of the ten northern tribes off the map. It was *their* Day of the Lord. Those who weren't killed in the conquest were sold into slavery and scattered across the empire. They ceased to exist as a people and a nation.

Where does that leave us? Hopefully you were able to detect in the description of the northern kingdom's religious life many close parallels to the state of much of the Christian Church today. The simple fact is that in the vast majority of churches in our country, the Bible is not taken as the authoritative and infallible Word of God. Most of the stories are considered little more than myths and fables. Many church bodies seem to be in a race to see which can most quickly discard and abandon the fundamental doctrines of the faith. You name it: Creation, the Triune nature of the Godhead, God's knowledge of all things, the virgin birth of Jesus, His being both God and man, His resurrection from the dead – all of these are being openly denied by professing Christians and taught against by supposedly faithful pastors.

Then there's the way the church worships. Sadly, a lot of what passes for Christian worship today, isn't. You have only to examine the lyrics of most contemporary praise songs. You find out that while they mention God and Jesus quite often, they really aren't about them at all. They aren't about what God has done for us in Jesus His Son. They are instead about the worshippers themselves: how devoted they are, and

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<sup>4</sup> Amos 8

how much they love the Lord. And every decade or so along comes some new experts who tell us that we have to reinvent the church. It has to be more *dynamic*, more *relevant*. They always say if the church doesn't change, it's going to die. But listen: the truth is that the death of the church happens *precisely* when it does change. It dies when the focus is taken off the basics of man's sin and God's grace in sending His Son to die for sinners.

But, of course, sin itself is being taken out of the discussion in most churches. Many professing Christians in our country today don't see any problem at all with murdering unborn children, for example. It's a personal choice, they say. And so are a lot of other things that the Lord specifically prohibits and condemns in the Scriptures. Same sex 'marriage' comes to mind. Sometimes it seems the only sin that remains is the sin of being critical of the personal choices that someone else makes.

But here's the thing: we see these things happening around us all the time. We would be foolish to think that it can't happen – indeed, that it isn't happening – to us. All of us have a tendency to want to compromise, to not be confrontational, to want to water down the Law's demands, to let the "little things" slip by, to not argue about doctrine, and to just kind of relax and go with the flow. But there's a reason we call the church in this world the Church Militant. We're in a fight: a fight to preserve the truth of God. And if you're not engaged in the fight then whether you mean to or not, you are helping to lose it.

The message of the prophet Amos is today more timely than ever. Through him the Lord is calling us to wake up and repent of our own spiritual lethargy and complacency. He's calling us to true worship that focuses on Christ and His saving work on our behalf. He's warning us

to ensure that we are properly prepared for the Day of the Lord so that it will be for us a day of glory and not of judgment.

May the Lord in His mercy give us the grace and wisdom to heed this call so that we remain prepared at all times. And may He give us the boldness and courage of the prophet to extend His message to others that they too may be delivered on the Day of the Lord. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

### PRAYER FOR THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God and Father, in wisdom You have made the world and all things, seen and unseen. We praise You for the gift of life, for the wonderful creation of our bodies, for our moral and spiritual capacities, and for the marvellous gifts of intelligence and reason. But, above all else, we thank and praise You for the gift of faith, by which we know You and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. We praise and worship Him for showing us Your great love by dying the death that enables sinners to live for ever. We praise You for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who has brought us to faith in Jesus, and has changed our hearts from rebellion against You to love and praise for You.

In mercy, pour out Your Spirit on us anew each day, so that our love, knowledge, and spiritual power may keep on growing, and our lives may be filled with the truly good qualities that only Jesus Christ can produce. Lead us by Your Spirit to love one another with brotherly love, and to forgive one another as You have forgiven us for Christ's sake.

Keep Your church in the true fellowship of the Gospel, that it may stand firm in the faith. Protect it against all its enemies, that it may serve You freely. We remember in particular those of Your children who are being persecuted because of their faith. Uphold them by Your Spirit,

and give them patient endurance, that they may witness to Your saving power. Move those who oppress them to turn to You. Free Your people from all falsehood and error, and lead them along the road of truth and godliness.

Fill the leaders of the nations with Your light, and dispel the darkness of sin and spiritual ignorance. Lead people everywhere to enjoy peace and happiness as they learn to love and follow You. Give wisdom and strength to all in authority in our country, that they may serve according to Your direction, and our people may live in unity and uprightness. Frustrate the schemes of the wicked, and further the efforts of the godly.

Move parents to sow Your Word in the hearts of their children, that the young may be raised in the ways of Christ and live lives that are a blessing to church, country, and mankind. Give parents the understanding and patience they need for their God-given responsibilities.

Watch over the sick, the sad, and the troubled. Stand by them in their sufferings, and help them in all their burdens. Protect all who are in any danger of body or soul, and save them by Your wise love. Help us in all times of need to look to You for pardon, peace, and healing.

These, and all other things that we may need, give us for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

Amos 5:18-24

<sup>18</sup> How horrible it will be for you who are longing for the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It will be darkness, and not light.

<sup>19</sup> It will be like a man who runs away from a lion, only to have a bear confront him. It will be like a man who goes home and rests his hand against a wall, only to have a snake bite him. <sup>20</sup> Will not the day of the LORD be

darkness, rather than light? Will it not be very dark, with nothing bright in it?

<sup>21</sup> “I hate and I despise your feasts. I cannot stand the stench of your festive assemblies. <sup>22</sup> Although you offer burnt offerings and your grain-offerings to Me, I shall not accept them. I shall not accept favourably the peace-offerings of your fattened steers. <sup>23</sup> Take away from Me the noise of your songs! I shall not listen to the music of your harps! <sup>24</sup> Rather, let justice flow like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

<sup>13</sup> Fellow-Christians, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, so that you may not grieve like the others, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we believe that even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> For this

we tell you by the Word of the Lord, that we who are still alive, who are left until the Lord comes, shall certainly not arrive ahead of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead who are in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Therefore comfort one another with these Words!

Matthew 25:1-13

<sup>1</sup> “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> For, when those who were foolish brought their lamps, they did not bring any olive-oil with them. <sup>4</sup> Those

who were wise, however, brought olive-oil in their jars with their lamps.<sup>5</sup> When the bridegroom took a long time, they all became drowsy, and began to sleep.<sup>6</sup> At midnight there was a shout: ‘The bridegroom is here! Come out to meet him!’<sup>7</sup> Then all those virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.<sup>8</sup> Those who were foolish asked those who were wise, ‘Give us some of your olive-oil! For our lamps are going out.’<sup>9</sup> However, those who were wise answered, ‘No, otherwise there will certainly not be enough for us and for you. Rather, go to those who sell oil, and buy some for yourselves!’<sup>10</sup> While they were going away to buy it, the bridegroom came. The ones who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut.<sup>11</sup> Later the other virgins also came and said, ‘Lord, lord, open the door for us!’<sup>12</sup> However, he

answered them, ‘Truly, I tell you, I do not know you.’

<sup>13</sup> “Therefore stay awake! For you do not know the day or the hour.”