

Unseen Peace(?)

“*The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.*” Notice: Jesus doesn’t say “if the time comes,” but **WHEN** the time comes. There will be a time when being faithful means that persecution, up to and including death, will be a certainty. Knowing that He’s speaking this to His apostles on Maundy Thursday at the Last Supper, all of whom would later experience martyrdom (except for Judas, who would tragically take his own life just a couple hours later, and St. John, although he certainly experienced a long life of persecution and suffering worthy of the term “martyr”), these words make perfect sense to our ears. Indeed, looking down through history, many a faithful Christian has experienced these words in their own lives. ***The history of Christendom is written in blood; the blood of Christ; the blood of faithful martyrs.*** Even today, this holds true. Christians around the world continue to be persecuted, imprisoned, and even slaughtered simply because they’re Christian. That’s their only crime—they believe in Jesus and walk in His way. “*The hour is coming....*” It’s here. It’s upon us, and in all reality, it’s been upon us since Jesus first spoke these words.

But here’s the thing: We could go on and on about how bad things are in the world and how bad they may/will get in the future, ***but is that what this lesson is really all about?*** Did Jesus speak these words so that we would proactively rise up and take up arms and start shedding blood in Crusader-like revolution?

“*Vengeance is _____. Take up your _____ and follow Me. If your neighbor strikes your cheek...strike him back, even harder?*” **No!** Did Jesus speak these words to get us ***paranoid or terrified?*** Did He speak these words so that we would all turn into terrified Chicken Littles, tucking our tails and running and hiding any time someone hurts our feelings? I’m sorry, but getting your feelings hurt doesn’t mean you’re being persecuted. Was our Lord prompting us with these words to take a page from the Amish and remove ourselves from all contact with the rest of the world that He so willingly shed His blood for? “*I don’t ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.*”

There it is! “*I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.*” Folks: There’s a reason this particular lesson is appointed for this particular Sunday. This is the first Sunday after the ascension. Like the book of Acts tells us, on that ascension mount Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of sight. Just consider how Jesus Himself was treated when He walked this earth and people beheld Him with their own eyes [*the crucifix*]. ***Do you honestly think things would improve once He’s no longer seen?***

And I do want you to take careful note on how I worded this. It’s important. I **NEVER** said that Jesus is no longer present. I **NEVER** said that Jesus is absent.

I never said it because Scripture doesn't say it—*ever*. ***No longer seen is not the same as absent or no longer present.***

Given all the persecution facing Christians in our world today, can we honestly say that we have it any different from those first martyrs/disciples? Not surprisingly, some would argue—yes, we ***do*** have it different. After all, those first disciples actually saw the resurrected Jesus with their own eyes. They physically touched His wounds. They heard His pronouncement of “peace” with their own ears. They ate with Him, walked with Him, and talked with Him, so of course they could have the confidence of faith to stare martyrdom in the face and not waver or be afraid! ***They had it “easier”!***

Is that really true though? If you think these guys had this ***rock-solid, fear-nothing faith*** simply because they had physical interaction with the resurrected Lord, **then you're wrong!** Remember that on that ascension mount—a full forty days after the resurrection—these guys ***still*** didn't get it. They were still asking Jesus if He was ***now*** going to pull the trigger and usher in the great worldly empire they had been imagining and expecting. “*My kingdom is not of this world!*” The angel's question to these men after seeing Jesus taken from their sight says it all: “*Why are you looking into the heavens?*” They thought that was it. ***Jesus was gone now. They were now all alone and on their own.*** It was only after the working of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (where they were gathered in an upper room—again—behind doors and out of sight) that they were finally able to understand. The Holy Spirit opened their eyes and ears of faith so that they could confidently behold and hold fast to Christ and His promise: “*I am with you always.*”

So... what's so different with us today? Answer: **NOTHING!** Our Lord ***continues*** to send His Holy Spirit to work and nurture that same saving faith in us, ***even in the midst of our tumults, trials, and tribulations... just like He promised.*** This same Holy Spirit continues to open our eyes and ears of faith to see and hear and hold fast to the crucified and resurrected Lord in our midst. Look around! Christ isn't gone! He's not absent! ***He's just hidden from our sight.*** “*I have said all this so that you don't fall away.*”

The big question for us has to be: Where do you look when the struggles and tribulations and persecutions come; ***when your faith is being put to the test and beat down?*** And let's face it: We get it on all sides, don't we? Sickness? Pain? Grief? Loss of friendships? Loss of loved ones? None of this even takes into account the disdain for faithful Christianity and the ridicule faithful Christians suffer when they dare to be... faithful. It's tough being a faithful Christian in today's world; tough enough (at times) to make a person doubt, if not “lose their religion.” “*Where are you God?!*” Where do you look? I know the “right” answer is “Jesus,” but is that true for you? ***Be careful! Your Lord knows the***

Truth! So many Christians suffer and then lose hope because, like those disciples atop that ascension mount, they're looking into the heavens for a **distant and departed Jesus**. They're straining to make contact with Him. They cry out, hoping that their cries will penetrate the vast distance between heaven and earth and fall upon the ears of an absent Jesus, who sits far away, enthroned at the right hand of God. **Sadly, they look right past Jesus in their midst.**

Where is Jesus? Answer: Right where He promises to be. Right where He tells us to look and listen and see and hear. *"I have said these things so that you don't fall away."* Look to this cross. I know this is something that happened in the past almost two thousand years ago. We can't go back to that day and hold fast to that bloody cross. **This is why Christ brings the victory of His cross and His resurrection to us!** Look no further than the font; the baptism that He Himself baptized you with, for it is here in the waters of Holy Baptism that Almighty God Himself put His triune name upon your head and your heart, claiming you as His own, making Christ's victory your victory. You bear His name—right now—the same God that made a promise in the Garden of Eden to save His people from their sins. Look to this cross. Here is where God kept that promise! Look to the font. Here is God taking action for us—for His name's sake—not because we deserve it, but because He loves us. God made a promise, and He keeps His promise. *"It is finished!"*

This same God and Lord has also promised to be with us always, for our forgiveness, our assurance, our peace. *"Take and eat. Take and drink. I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* Look to this altar. Look to this pulpit and lectern. **Look and listen. Here is your Lord Christ, keeping His promise!** Your Lord is not absent. He's not even "unseen." He's just recognized through the eyes of faith; eyes that are opened through the working of the Holy Spirit—the Helper—so that we do not lose faith or fall away in despair or fear.

Look: I don't know what the future holds for us on this side of eternity. Maybe it will get better. Maybe this is as good as it ever gets. Maybe it will get worse. **Whatever the case, though, through it all our Lord is with us, right where He promises to be—His Word and His sacraments.** Through persecutions, through the dark and terrifying storms of life, through pain and sorrow and loss, even when tensions rise and division and hatred increases, **our Lord is with us**, and where our Lord is there is peace; a peace the world does not know, cannot give, and can never take away. My friends: Here is this peace, for you. Here is Christ, for you. Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow!

In His holy name...

AMEN