

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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November 6, 2005
2nd Sunday of End time
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Daniel 7:9,10
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 90
Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

Don't Be Surprised!

Over the course of your lifetime, I am sure you have had many things surprise you, haven't you? Some surprises are kind of inconsequential—like say you are over in the gym for a dinner and you take a piece of pie expecting it to be coconut cream and you bite into it and it's banana cream. Okay, it's a surprise, but it's still pie. You aren't losing anything, right?

Some surprises have more consequences to them. You are driving down the street and the person in front of you stops suddenly and you slam on the brakes and the brake pedal goes all the way to the floor and the car doesn't seem to be slowing. It's a surprise, and not necessarily a good one.

This morning our God reminds us that the Day of the Lord, Judgment Day—which we focused on last Judgment Sunday—is going to surprise us. It is going to *“come like a thief in the night”* and it is going to come unexpectedly. A thief doesn't call up and say, “Hey, I'm going to be in your neighborhood about 3 a.m. next Thursday. Does that work out for you? Can I stop by and rob you?” They come unexpectedly. So in a sense the Day of Last Judgment will be a surprise, but our God says to us today, “Do not be surprised by it” in the sense of don't let it be a bad surprise—a surprise that has terrible and horrific consequences. Our God wants us to always be ready since it will come unexpectedly.

So when he says to us this morning, “Don't be surprised”, he is reminding us to always be ready for Christ's second coming. Always live in complete and constant readiness. He tells us this morning what that readiness will consist in. He says to us, *“be alert and self-controlled.”* In our text he spells out pretty clearly for us what he is talking about when he says that. Then he reminds us that as we live in this being self-controlled and being alert, always being ready for Christ's second coming, he says, “You have a responsibility towards other people”—*“encourage one another and build each other up”* so that those around you are ready and are not surprised in this negative way. So don't be surprised.

Paul had to write to the Thessalonians because there were things that they were going to be surprised by because they had some mistaken notions about Christ's second coming. Some of them had quit their jobs and stopped working and stopped doing anything because they were expecting his return right then and there. He had to write to correct them about their mistaken notions about Christ's second coming. That is why he said he didn't need to tell them about times and dates because he had already

addressed that topic earlier saying that we don't know when it is going to come. Even the angels in heaven don't know when Christ is going to return. In reality, that is a good thing because if God had told us that on such and such a date he is going to return for the second coming, you and I might think that we have plenty of time to get ready, or it is not even going to be in our lifetimes so we might think we could wait to be ready to meet our God until it is closer to the end of our lives. That is not what God wants. He wants us to live in constant readiness. We should constantly be ready to meet our maker because his end could come at any time or our end could come at any time. We could suddenly be called out of this world. So we need to live in constant readiness.

Not only do we need to because of those reasons, but when it comes right down to it, don't we want to—the new self in us wants to live close to God. The part of us that loves the fact that our Lord loved us so much that he lived in our place and died in our place, that he left heaven and came to this world and became one of us simply because he loves us and he wants us to be with him in heaven. Don't we want to live close to him? Don't we want to snuggle up next to him like a child does next to their father's arms as they sit in a pew or sit on a couch? What better feeling can we have than to live close to our God?

That is why he tells us to be self-controlled and alert because we have enemies that are going to be attacking our soul, and we know this. But he defines what being self-controlled and alert means. It doesn't mean it is something necessarily that we are or we do, but it means we get ourselves close to what God has done for us. When he talks about being in the light—Christ is the light of the world and Scripture talks about Satan being the prince of darkness—he uses that comparison—light and darkness—which is throughout Scripture. He tells us that since we are children of the light, we should live in the light. He tells us not to be like others who are asleep, but we should be alert and self-controlled. A little while later he defines what it means to be self-controlled. He says, *“let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.”* This goes back to some of the words that he used in writing to the Ephesians about the full armor of God. He connects for you and I, being self-controlled and alert is not something necessarily that we do, but more of what we are. We are people who are living in connection to Jesus Christ, who lived in our place and died in our place. It is not that we have to do this or that, but that we believe in Christ. When we believe in Christ, we have this armor of God on us—faith and love—faith that Jesus has done it all. It is not our doing, like we focused on last week with Reformation, that it is grace—God's undeserved love—that caused him to save us—not our efforts. It is faith in Jesus alone that saves us—not our works.

So put on faith and then love—God's love for us in Christ—put that on like armor, like a breastplate, so that when our enemy, the devil, who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour—that when he attacks us, his attacks are going to bounce off of that breastplate of our faith.

Think about what faith is—it is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we can't see. Sometimes our sinful nature gets all tripped up over this idea of the Last Judgment, because it doesn't fit with our sinful nature's preconceived notion of what God should be. We think of God as a God of love. That means he should just

completely ignore sin and not punish sin or not send anything to hell, but just take us all to heaven. That would be a God of love in our minds. So this idea that God is actually going to have people that go to hell troubles us and becomes a stumbling block that we trip over. But faith understands that God is not fair and faith rejoices that God is not fair. Sinful nature says it is not fair that people are going to be in hell. Faith says that it is not fair that people are going to be in heaven because God has clearly said, "*The wages of sin is death*"—not physical death like all the people that are buried in our cemetery, but eternal death in hell. That is what each and every person deserves. Yet God, in his unfair love, punished Jesus instead of us. So faith grabs hold of that and holds onto that and puts its confidence in nothing else and doesn't look for logical explanations about what God should or should not do with judgment. Instead faith rejoices that God has taken away our sins and that he has loved us with his perfect love so that when Last Judgment comes, it is not a day of wrath and a day of mourning for us, because we know that our God has come to take us to be with him in heaven. It is a day of joy because we will be with the Lord forever.

So we put on that faith and that love that God has for us in Christ and that keeps us always ready so that we will never be surprised. What a wonderful thing that is—this absolute confidence that you and I can have that if the world were to end before I finish the next sentence, we would all be with our Lord in heaven. That is God's gift to us because Jesus lived in our place perfectly where we can't, and then Jesus died in our place taking all of our sins and the punishment our sins deserve on himself.

But while we live in this world, while we are striving to be self-controlled and alert and putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of heaven as our helmet, we not only just worry about ourselves, God has told us that we have a responsibility toward each other. He calls us to "*encourage one another and build each other up*"—to encourage one another not with just "hang in there, things will get better", but to encourage one another with that specific faith, love and hope. That specific knowledge that God loves you and is with you no matter what you are going through. No matter what difficulty you face, no matter what obstacle is in your path, no matter what thing keeps you up at night, your God loves you. The devil is going to be tempting us to doubt that. Our own senses at times test us to doubt that truth. That is why we need brothers and sisters in the faith to encourage us, to keep pointing us back to God's love for us in Christ, and to remind us that we are baptized children of God, to remind us that we receive his very body and blood so that we have this absolute certainty that our God loves us.

You and I need that encouragement, don't we? Because as we go through this life, we can focus on what we can see in front of us and we can get distracted from eternity. We can get so worried about laying up stores for this lifetime—planning our retirement, planning how to pay for college, planning this or that—that we can let those things become more important to us than our God and always being ready. Our priorities can get goofed up, turned around, twisted upside down. We can even convince ourselves that it is a good thing not to give something back to the Lord because he would really want us to use it for ourselves and not for him.

So I need you to encourage me to be in Christ, to grow in Christ, and you need me and others to encourage you. God has given that to us as a responsibility so when your brother or sister in the faith comes and encourages you or admonishes you or offers you comfort with the Gospel, don't be surprised by that. That is what God has put them there for. If we are going to be the body of Christ that God wants us to be here in our area, we need to encourage and build one another up in Christian love and to receive that encouragement as such.

The Day of the Lord is coming soon and very soon, as our preschoolers and kindergarteners reminded us this morning. You and I know that we are ready because we know that we have a Savior who took away our sins.