

The Grand Procession.

Text: Isa 66:20-24

Suggested Hymns:

485, 42, 492T398, 292, 490

- 1) The Gentiles
- 2) Your Identity will not be lost
- 3) All people will worship the Lord
- 4) you have the power to reject

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 is Isaiah 66:20-24, ²⁰ *“Then they shall bring all your brethren for an offering to the LORD out of all nations, on horses and in chariots and in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem,” says the LORD, “as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the LORD.* ²¹ *“And I will also take some of them for priests and Levites,” says the Lord.*

²² *“For as the new heavens and the new earth Which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the LORD, “So shall your descendants and your name remain.* ²³ *And it shall come to pass That from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the LORD.* ²⁴ *“And they shall go forth and look Upon the corpses of the men Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, And their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”* (NKJV)

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

Dear friends in Christ,

In these concluding weeks and days of another church year our thoughts quite naturally turn to the end of all things, when this whole scene will reach its final stage.

There are times when our minds seem to be bombarded with all kinds of questions, When will the end come? What will it really be like? How and where will I fit into the picture?

God’s Word is not silent on this point. There are many places in the Holy Scripture, in both the Old and the New Testaments, where the last days and the Last Day are discussed and foretold — sometimes in the most careful detail.

We sometimes forget that people have been raising these questions for centuries and that God has also been answering them for centuries. If we feel that our questions have not been answered, it may very well be that we have been asking the wrong questions. Or else, having asked the questions, we have not really been listening to God's answers.

God, who spoke by the prophets, has before us one such answer in our text for this second-to-last Sunday of the Church Year. These are words written by Isaiah, a mighty prophet in days of old — words which bring the whole sweep of his book to a close in a grand panorama. It is a picture for us to see and study and ponder.

May the Lord bless our meditation as we consider the grand procession.

1. The Gentiles Are Also Called Into The Kingdom Of God

As always, when we encounter prophecy such as this, we do well to consider more than one direction toward which it may be pointing. Finally, the only mature and proper way to read these words is to say: they have been fulfilled; they are being fulfilled; they will be fulfilled. To choose one explanation to the exclusion of the others might find us caught looking in the wrong direction.

We could then easily miss the whole point of what the prophecy is trying to tell us, and the whole reason why it was written in the first place. The fulfilment of prophecy doesn't necessarily all happen at once but keeps recurring.

This is evident in the opening verse of our text, *“Then they shall bring all your brethren for an offering to the LORD out of all nations, on horses and in chariots and in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem,” says the LORD, “as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the LORD.*

Here we are shown a grand procession, reminiscent of the great processions up to Jerusalem at the time of the great feasts, with the faithful bringing their sacrifices and offerings.

But now the people — the Gentiles — are themselves the offerings, and now they come in means of transportation quite unavailable to the Jews of that day. We cannot help thinking of at least one occasion on which this prophecy was at least partially fulfilled.

We see the procession of the Wise Men making its way to the manger for the first epiphany of the Saviour to the Gentiles. More important than their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh was their offering of themselves to the Christ Child.

Some years later we find St. Paul writing to the Roman Christians, ¹⁶ *that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*¹

What is this, but the offering of which Isaiah spoke? In our text the Gentiles are referred to as *brethren*. St. Paul calls them “*children of the promise*” as we read in Romans 9:6b-8, “*For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, ⁷ nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” ⁸ That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.*”

What about today? It shouldn't come as a shock to us to recognise the very words of our text being fulfilled. We dare not put words into the prophet's mouth which are not there, but certainly this prediction is being realised as the best methods and programming of printing, radio, television, and internet are used as vehicles to bring more and more people to the new Jerusalem, the kingdom of God. They are called by His Gospel and washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, as offerings in a clean vessel.

Not only are the Gentile believers accepted as an offering, but the Lord makes the startling announcement in our text, “*And I will also take some of them for priests and Levites,*” *says the Lord*. The priesthood, so carefully preserved and reserved through the centuries, was now to be made available to all people — even the Gentiles!

And so, as the New Testament era came into being, elders were appointed from the Gentile congregations. We read in Ephesians 4:11-12, ¹¹ *And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*

We also read in 1 Peter 2:5 concerning the Gentiles, ⁵ *you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

2. Your Identity Will Not Be Lost

God places one promise upon another in our text. Do you wonder what will happen to you when this world comes to a close? Many drastic changes will take place. Will you be lost in the shuffle? Will your identity be drowned out? God gives His answer in our text, *“For as the new heavens and the new earth Which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the LORD, “So shall your descendants and your name remain.*

The promise of new heavens and a new earth was repeated in later years, as we read in the Revelation of St. John, ¹ *Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.*² Again, God had partially fulfilled this prophecy as He sent His Son and gave His New Testament. The New Covenant involved new commandments and new promises relating to both heaven and earth.

As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*³ The new heavens and the new earth were not to do away with the name and the seed of God’s people. Quite the opposite. The fulfilment of this promise served to preserve and enrich and extend the name and the seed of God’s people. He acted for them, for us.

God’s action is also for us as He promises the complete fulfilment of this newness. St. Peter voiced that promise as he instructed and admonished the people of his day, in 2 Peter 3:10-14, ¹⁰ *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.*

¹¹ *Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, ¹² looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?*

¹³ *Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.* ¹⁴ *Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.*

It is toward that Day and because of that Day that we live and work and play and weep and laugh and die, because the redeeming love of Jesus Christ our Saviour has cleansed us in body and soul. His Spirit has sanctified our breath and movement as we spend these hours and days in the hope and confidence of an eternity with Him. For this we were created and redeemed and sanctified.

3. All People Will Worship The Lord

For all that God has done for us we praise and adore His holy name. Our text says, *And it shall come to pass That from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the LORD.* The worship of the Lord is and always has been the chief function of the communion of saints. Regular worship, from week to week and season to season, is the expression of the life in Christ.

Under the New Covenant it is no longer bound to the Law under the shadow of things to come; but it is the Gospel-motivated adoration by the body of Christ, where two or three are gathered in His name, in His presence. If you want an honest and accurate picture of the Christian life, you can see it in the redeemed child of God whose whole life is one of worship. And if you want an honest and accurate picture of our future life in heaven, it is the complete and perfect extension of that life of worship.

St. John looked into heaven, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, this is what he wrote in Revelation 5:13-14, ¹³ *And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: “Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!”* ¹⁴ *Then the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.*

4. You Have The Power To Reject

On such a joyful note we might be tempted to conclude our study of the last things. You and I are usually content to leave it at that. It is already beyond our wildest imagination. We could scarcely wish to hear more. But there is more. And we need to hear it. We still need to see and study and ponder.

This is the verse with which Isaiah ends his major prophetic work, ***“And they shall go forth and look Upon the corpses of the men Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, And their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”***

What is your reaction to that? Our 21st century nature fights against it. *“That just doesn’t sound like God!”* Precisely! It isn’t like God. In fact, it isn’t God at all. It is man who chooses, freely and deliberately, to take this course away from God.

Of course, God gives to you the choice you want. That is what God is like. He lovingly makes His covenant with you, but He forces His covenant on no one.

Those who make such a ghastly choice could hardly have a clear concept of the consequences. That is why we have the description before us, for all to read and remember.

The people of Jerusalem had a view of the unburied bodies in the Valley of Hinnom, south of the city, where a perpetual fire was kept to consume the refuse thrown there. This closing verse of our text needed little explanation for the people who read it in Isaiah’s day.

As we then look at this same city sometime after our Lord came to earth, suffered, died, arose, and ascended again to heaven, the awful destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 seems to point back to this very prophecy of our text.

But much more is intended here, for Christ Himself repeated the warning, not once, but three times, spelling out the reference to everlasting hell. Christ said in Mark 9:43-48, ⁴³ ***“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched --*** ⁴⁴ ***“where ‘Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.’***

⁴⁵ ***“And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that***

shall never be quenched -- ⁴⁶ *“where ‘Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.’*

⁴⁷ *“And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire --* ⁴⁸ *“where ‘Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.’*

It is disgusting to all flesh. It is terrible both for God and for His children to consider. The most terrible part is this, How can anything or anyone exist apart from God? But that is hell. It keeps on existing like that. Pitiful! Horrible! Revolting!

It is an unpleasant scene. It was not intended to be pleasant. It is a realistic description of hell: separation from God. The reality of it was emphasised by our Lord in the words which we read in Mark 16:16, ¹⁶ ***“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.***

God has good reason to warn us. He knows. It makes the preaching of His Law all the more necessary — and very much in keeping with His intense concern for all people. It also makes the preaching of the Gospel all the more wonderful as we see the overwhelming work done for our salvation.

So the procession goes on. It is the Gospel of our Lord’s redeeming love which keeps the procession going. It is the grand procession of all who in Word and Sacrament are drawn into the company of His church and ushered at last into His eternal presence. May God grant this to us all. Amen.

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

¹ Romans 15:16

² Revelation 21:1

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17