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### In the Season after Pentecost

#### Jesus Is Coming to Judge

In the Nicene Creed the Christian Church confesses that Jesus “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” Those who came to believe in Jesus during their lifetime will be judged as innocent before God and will enter the gates of paradise. Those who refused to believe and rejected Jesus during their lifetime will be judged guilty before God and will enter the dungeon of hell. Whatever judgment occurs at the time of one’s death is ratified and confirmed on Judgment Day as the bodies of all who have died come out of their graves to stand before Christ. Christians look forward to that day in eager faith but with holy reverence.

#### Sermon

#### Daniel 3:1-3

#### Light Always Beats Darkness

**At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.**

The world just isn’t what it used to be. “Christian” used to be a label that people wanted; now it seems more like an insult. Church used to be the place you went to find peace and comfort; now it’s merely a building that is in desperate need of repair, or at least someone to use it. Pastor used to be a community leader; now, who would want to be a pastor? It is hard to watch as the culture around us runs into moral decay with a smile as if nothing could be better than to flee from morality and the truth of God’s grace.

Daniel probably felt this way too. Taken from his home as a child, he was put to work in the service of a foreign king, the same king who laid waste to Daniel’s home and destroyed all that he had known and loved. But Daniel persevered. He stood firm on the promises of the Lord. He lived his life in such a way that it drew both ire from his equals and respect from his superiors. But even as he found what seemed like success, he must’ve wondered to himself: what happened to the world? The book of Daniel is a record of the perseverance of Daniel and a few other faithful men in this situation. At the end of the book, Daniel reports how he was given a vision in this foreign land of the unfolding of history, of the kingdoms that would rise and fall after he was long departed. And at the end of all this warfare and endless shifting of borders, he saw a king worse than all the ones who had come before. But this king would do as he pleased and what he wanted was to take over the world, to ignore all religion and instead set himself up as the head over state, church, family. But this king too would come to an end and when he did, there would be no one fighting for him. And it is at this moment in history when Michael comes. Michael, the archangel who protects God’s people, will arise when this time of distress reaches its pinnacle.

The time of distress is now. This is the time after Christ’s first coming and before his triumphal return. How will we know what it looks like? The vision describes “a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of the nations.” This is a time of great darkness. Let’s look for a moment at our world: wars and rumors of wars? Check. A global pandemic that not only killed millions but changed the very way we live and even caused churches to close their doors? Check. Discord among families? Check. Floods, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes? Check for all of them. A society that no

longer tolerates the preaching of God's Word as it is written? Check. If this isn't distress, I don't know what is. It seems like the darkness is pressing in.

But God promises that "at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered." Deliverance is on its way! What does deliverance look like? Here, it is described as bodily resurrection. This passage, Daniel 12:2, is the most clear and direct reference in the entire Old Testament to bodily resurrection and it is placed right here, right in the context of deliverance from a distress that is so great that it has never been experienced before; a darkness so black that it is unknown! We have the absolute confidence that the darkness of death and sin and moral decay is not the end! Daniel sees that he will be raised to life just like all the believers who have passed away before the resurrection. But not just the believers will rise from the grave. Unbelievers, those who broke God's command and rejected his promise of forgiveness, they will be raised, too. And they will be raised, not for a second chance, but for a final judgement. It is a chilling reminder that our great God of love who promises deliverance is also a just God who demands eternal payment for sins.

Then, the vision turns back to "the wise." This is simply a reference to believers. The gift that God offers is foolishness to unbelievers, as Paul says. But to those who have faith, they are given truth and true wisdom, wisdom to know God. And they "will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." What a powerful picture. Think of the night sky. When you look up, it appears dark, but throughout there are stars. Even though at night we don't see the sun and especially because of it, we see how those stars shine brightly! On the darkest of nights, there is always light in the sky. This is the glory that God has in store for us! That we would shine brightly, just like Jesus!

But we are not there yet. We still live on earth where the powers of this dark world fight against us every day. We still struggle with sin and the effects of sin every day. We look at how broken the world is and we say, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Do you see how bad the world is getting? Do you see the pain and suffering? Do you see the declining of the church? Deliver us, Lord Jesus!" And maybe as we see the darkness pressing in, we start to doubt. Jesus has been gone for almost two thousand years. Is he really coming back? Or maybe the world is right. Maybe we are the fools and have played the part well. There is no deliverance. Michael is not going to come and deliver us. There is no book with our names written in it. We are on our own. That is a dark place to be.

It can certainly feel that way, can't it? Satan's lies always have that tinge of truth, just enough to make us think, "Did God really say...?" And we are just like our father and mother Adam and Eve and we take a bite of that fruit and swallow hard. The lie that Satan tells us is that Jesus isn't coming back. This is the lie that the world so desperately wants us to convince us of. But most importantly, this is the lie that our sinful hearts just want us to give in to. Our sinful hearts talk to us like Job's wife who said, "Curse God and die!" If death and taxes are the only sure things in life, then why not live how you want! Daniel died as a foreigner. He never saw the land of Israel again, at least not a free Israel. We too, will die, eventually. We know this. There is no escaping the darkness of death. And if the world is right, it's nothing but darkness after that.

But we know more. We know that death is not the end for us; God makes us wise to know that. He makes us wise enough to know that we will live in eternity with our bodies, these very bodies, in eternal perfection! For all the stress that you endure, for all the pain and suffering that you encounter, God promises eternal deliverance. The world thinks of deliverance as someone taking your mortgage, as a free car, or paying the bills, or an army marching in to bring peace to a war-torn city. Maybe they even think of deliverance as a friend who won't give up on them when everyone else does. But that is the tip of the iceberg for the deliverance God planned for you. His plan was to send his Son. His Son would perfectly obey every command that we never could. He would trust in every word of his heavenly father. Then this Son of God would die an innocent death only to rise again. This resurrection, the first of its kind, is the proof that God will raise you, too! John chapter 1 says of Jesus, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." God sent the brightest light that he could, his very own Son. And through that light, through Christ, there is life everlasting! Daniel saw this coming in a vision hundreds of years in advance, and the promise came true. And his promises not yet fulfilled will come true: just as he brought Jesus out of the grave, he will bring you, too! Just as he glorified Jesus before all creation, he will glorify you on the Last Day!

The suffering that you have experienced in your life is not gone, it is still there, and it will still weigh on you. But under the weight of that suffering, remember that you have a promise of deliverance. Though the world seems dark, you share in the light even now. Through baptism, you have been buried with Christ and you have been born again! The perfect life that Christ lived is now your life! You will shine as bright as the stars in heaven, but your new nature is already shining before God. Your name is written in the book. Your name, by God's mercy in Christ, will be called on that Last and Triumphant day to receive eternal glory and light, the lights of which we have never seen before.

Darkness is strange, is it not? It is the mere absence of light. It has no power of its own. And yet, in our world, the darkness grows. The world is only going to get worse. You know that as well as I do. But as the world marches on, so does God's Word. His Word reveals a light that no darkness can overcome. Light always beats dark. Jesus always beats sin. He always beats death. And what is left when sin and death are gone? Pure joy. Joy in the forgiveness that we have through Christ's work.

As you go back into the world this week, remember that light beats dark. Remember that Jesus has already beaten your worst enemy, the devil, and won! Remember that you now carry his light with you: the light of the gospel. Whether you realize it or not, you are shining, not because of the righteous things you have done but because of his mercy. This is the light that will always win. This is the light with which we will shine into eternity. Amen.