

Luke 21:5-28

When a great fire sweeps across a forest, there is activity like never before. Birds take flight. Animals run. Reptiles slither. Even insects crawl as fast as their little legs will take them. Panic is everywhere. Everything in the forest is trying desperately to get away from the approaching fire.

Everything that is, except for one thing: the trees. The trees in the forest do not move. They don't cower and hide. They don't cry out in fear. They stand up straight and tall as the deadly fire draws near. My friends, what we learn from Jesus' words in our text today is that He wants us to be such trees. The fire is coming...the fire of Judgment Day. We do not know when it will arrive, but we do know it is on its way. Jesus says so.

There was a smaller fire that came in the year 70. It swept across Judea. The city of Jerusalem was trampled underfoot and the temple was destroyed. Not one stone was left upon another. Jesus told His disciples that this fire was coming too. He did not say when, but He said to be prepared. And for this fire He said, "Run!" *"Flee to the mountains...let those who are inside the city depart."* "Do not stand fast like trees for this fire, but get away quickly!"

And why? Because this fire was one of vengeance to fulfill what was written in Scripture...God's wrath upon the Jewish people for rejecting Jesus Christ. The first-century historian, Josephus, writes that over a million people died when the Gentiles overran Judea and destroyed Jerusalem, and 97,000 were taken captive. Yet this is but a small fire compared to the one that is coming in the end. Not just Jerusalem, but the whole world will be destroyed in the fire of Judgment Day.

Already there are hot spots in various places throughout the world. Famines, earthquakes, pestilences. There are wars and rumors of wars. These fires break out from time to time to remind us of the big one that is coming. *"Do not be terrified,"* says Jesus in our text. *"These (smaller fires) must first take place, but the end will not be at once."*

Throughout the entire New Testament era, ever since the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, these warning fires have come and gone. And when these come, people panic. "It's the end of the world!" some cry out. But not yet, for before the end comes, things will get worse, for the world yes, but especially for the church.

Within the church false teachers will spread their lies and they will deceive many, for they will come in Jesus' name. Yet they come preaching a false Jesus. Beware of those who gain large followings. The devil loves to give success to his false preachers. He loves to make them rich and popular. But not so with those who preach the true Jesus. Not success in the eyes of the world for them, but persecution. *"You will be hated by all,"* says Jesus, *"for My name's sake."*

And when persecution comes, "Stand fast," He tells His disciples, "be like trees in this." *"They will lay their hands on you...and some of you they will put to death,"* He says, *"but not a hair of your head will perish."* Like an angry fire, they may strip you of all your leaves, and turn your limbs to ashes. They may cut you down in the forest, but in the resurrection you will be whole again.

There is only one way for a tree to stand up straight and tall when the fires come. Its roots must go down deep. A Christian who does the bare minimum is not very wise, but may end up like the five foolish virgins. Do you believe the fire is coming? Then you surely would not act as if it was not, taking

God's Word for granted, barely acquainting yourself with it; taking the gifts given in the Divine Service and at the Communion table for granted. Woe to the one who thinks that his roots are deep enough. That is never the mark of those who are God's elect.

If we are to be trees that stand up straight and tall, with roots deep, how we need to gaze intently upon Jesus. For on such a tree He was hung, suspended between heaven and earth. He hung there on the tree of the cross not as our example, but as our Savior. On that day the angry fire of God's wrath came to Jesus and laid into Him. It punished Him in the place of every sinner. Your Lord was in agony as He endured that fire.

But because He did, you have nothing to fear. You are safe in Jesus. It's because, my friend, God forgives you for Jesus' sake. No sin in your past can send you into the fire of hell. All your sin is forgiven because, for you Jesus died.

Remember your baptism. Because your head is always wet with that water, the fires of this life can only hurt for a time, but they cannot burn you. And staying in the water of your baptism, which is to say staying in Christ Jesus, rooted deep in His words, God's fiery wrath of Judgment cannot consume you, for it already consumed Jesus in your place.

When the fire comes in the end, says Jesus, *"people will faint with fear."* They will run like scared animals, but with no place to hide. But you remain God's trees, rooted in Christ. When the fire comes, *"straighten up,"* says Jesus, *"and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near."*

The eucalyptus tree has its seeds contained in a cone and covered with resin. That seed cannot sprout until a fire comes. The fire burns away the resin and opens the cone, and the seed becomes full of life.

This is what awaits you as God's eucalyptus trees. The resurrected life in Christ. But first, the fire must come. And let it come. You will not run. You will not cower and hide. You are God's tree, standing straight and tall with your head raised up, for you have His promise that when that fire comes, your redemption is drawing near. Amen.