

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost • November 13, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

“Like a Ninja”

You may have heard that Judgment Day was coming this year – twice. A man named Harold Camping made the national news following years of looking ahead to what he taught would be the date of the “Rapture” and God’s bringing an end to the world that we know. The day of Christ’s return, he predicted, would come on May 21, 2011. Some people took his prediction to heart, even selling off their possessions with the expectation that they wouldn’t need anything after May 21st. And then May 22nd came around. After some time, Mr. Camping came forward again to say that Judgment Day would come in its fullness on October 21, 2011. But it didn’t. And now he has retired from his radio ministry, even reportedly acknowledging that no one can know the exact date or time when Jesus would return to bring the final judgment. Mr. Camping hasn’t been alone in trying to determine when Christ would come back; in fact, people have been wondering about that since shortly after he ascended into heaven.

In our reading from 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul addresses this same concern. Those early Christians were concerned about their fellow believers who had passed away, thinking that those people would miss out on Jesus’ return. Paul comforts them with the assurance that all those that God has called to be His own would be present for Jesus’ return, even those who had died. That led to his pointing ahead to the Day of the Lord in our reading from 1 Thessalonians 5, quieting those early Christians’ worries as to when that day would come to pass. When it does arrive, he writes, it will be like a thief in the night. Back in those days, the thief could quietly slip into a home in the dead of the night. Provided they were silent, thieves could gain entry to your valuables and carry them off. They could come and steal away livestock that you’d left outside. People didn’t have sophisticated locks or tempered glass or remote-monitored security systems. But we do. We take precautions against the thief in the night to deter him from taking what doesn’t belong to him. What if we were to think of the coming of the Day of the Lord in a different way? **What if it wasn’t coming so much as a thief in the night, but like a ninja?**

You don’t want a ninja coming for you. I’m guessing that you’ve seen a ninja: they’ve been part of American pop culture for decades, appearing in movies and TV shows. When you hear the names Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and Michelangelo, you might not think of Renaissance artists but Ninja Turtles. Some of you probably even have the Fruit Ninja game on your smartphone or Xbox, slashing away with your imaginary ninja blade as scores of fruit fly through the air. But the real ninja weren’t so much fun. Coming from the days of feudal Japan, ninja were like the James Bond agents of their time – the Daniel Craig kind of Bond, not the Sean Connery or Roger Moore types. Ninja practiced covert warfare. **Their greatest strength lay in going undetected.** They would serve as agents for espionage and infiltration. They would look to kill their intended victims through means of stealth, staying concealed in shadows and silence. You might have the mental image of ninja wearing a black garb and hood to fade into the night, yet they would often travel in disguise, looking like the rest of the people around them. And while you might never know when a ninja would come to carry out their assignment, you’d definitely know once they had. *Ha! Ninja attack!*

The Day of the Lord is like a ninja, for it will come upon the world suddenly and unpredictably. But while Harold Camping was incorrect in thinking that he could figure out exactly when Jesus would return and bring an end to the world as we know it, Paul reminds us that, yes, Judgment Day is indeed still coming. In these closing weeks of the church year, that’s where we turn our focus. God calls His “children of the light” to watch and prepare, making use of what He gives us while we await Christ’s return. Jesus will come again into our world, not as a

baby but as the King of all. He will return as the one true Lord who sits in authority to settle accounts between God and humanity. So what does that mean for Christians? Will we be ready for him?

Complacency is a problem. When you're complacent, you don't care so much about what ought to change. You're satisfied with how things are, usually neglecting a problem that needs to be addressed. Things are pleasant, and why would you want to upset a pleasant situation? There's peace. There's security. Sure, you should really probably possibly perhaps do something that you're not doing or stop doing something that you have been doing, but – eh – maybe you could get around to doing it tomorrow. But there's the problem with complacency: you stop paying attention. *Ha! Ninja attack!* Striking from the shadows, something comes and catches you completely unprepared. Complacency is the enemy of readiness. It's like being asleep, living your life in darkness. Christians are not meant for the darkness. **You are children of the light, called to readiness.**

As Paul points out, making ready for the Day of the Lord isn't about knowing the "when." As you've heard before, the ancient Greeks had a few ways of thinking about time: the *chronos* and the *kairos*, or the times and the seasons, as our reading has it today. Harold Camping and others have long sought to determine just when Jesus would return; however, Jesus himself told his disciples that *no one* would know when the end would come – like a ninja. **Trying to figure out the "when" is missing the point!** Instead, remember who it is that's coming, not to spy on you, to steal from you, or to kill you, but to deliver you. Jesus, the Lord whose return you await, was already here. He has given his life so that you might live. He has forgiven you. You have shelter and atonement under his cross. He has made you to be a child of the light.

God is calling you to readiness today. While a ninja may strike unexpectedly, that does not mean that he would find you unprepared. For us Christians, that means that we are to walk in holiness of living – not working to earn a favorable decision on Judgment Day, but recognizing that the work of Christ is our defense and that he has brought us out of darkness into light. Reflect on your life today and in all these days as the church year comes to a close. Pay attention to your living and the choices that you are making. Seek the counsel and support of your fellow believers, who are awake with you, so that you prepare for our Lord's return together – as Paul wrote, encourage one another and build each other up. For us Christians, living in holiness is living in readiness and avoiding complacency.

Back in feudal Japan, people would prepare against ninja in a number of ways. Some palaces included floating floors that were built on metal hinges so that there'd be a loud creak whenever someone walked across them. Others made use of labyrinthine layouts, so that anyone making their way in could be seen as they wound their way to the inner rooms. Even the gravel yards outside buildings could give an audible signal as someone crossed the grounds. These preparations helped to keep the people aware of what was coming. **We are aware.** We expect that great day that is to come when our Jesus returns to be with us forever. What's more, as Paul reminds us, we have the equipment that God provides: faith and love, the hope of salvation, all working together to keep us awake and aware as we watch for that Last Day. As children of the light, we can look ahead with the joyful expectation of Christ's return.

We don't know when the Day of the Lord will come. **But in Jesus, we'll be ready.**
Amen.