

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 26 / Last Judgment
November 17, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Ready for the big day

—Hebrews 9:24-28

We know that this world cannot last forever. We see things deteriorating and decaying, and we know that this present world cannot continue indefinitely; it must end. But the question is: How will it end?

Will the world end because of climate change? Will climate change result in this planet becoming uninhabitable, so that the human race will have to move to Mars in order to survive? Will the world end because of a nuclear holocaust? Will warring powers unleash nuclear firepower on the earth, resulting in the destruction of the planet and the end of the human race? Will the world end a couple billion years from now, as a result of natural process, when our sun reaches the end of its life and explodes in a supernova? There are a lot of theories out there about how this world will come to its end.

As Christians, we know exactly how the world will end because Jesus has told us how it will end. It will end on the day that God Almighty, the Creator of the universe, has set for the world to end. It will end on the day that Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. The Apostle Peter tells us what will happen: The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare (2 Peter 3:10). Jesus tells us, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left” (Matthew 25:31-33). In our Gospel today Jesus told us, “All who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28,29). We know how the world will end, and we know what will happen when the world ends. That is Judgment Day, the day when the fate of every single human being for all eternity is publicly known.

What we don't know is *when* the world will end.

The important thing is to be ready. Because if we're not ready, and that day catches us unawares and unprepared, there are no second chances. We need to be ready for the big day.

In God's Word in Hebrews today there are actually two things that the Scripture is pointing us to. One is the day of *our* death, when *our* time on earth is done, and the other is the day of judgment when the *world's* time is done. The book of Hebrews is excellent for connecting the dots between the Old Testament and the New Testament in the Bible. It helps us understand the meaning of a lot of things in the Old Testament. Hebrews is written to Jewish people, who were familiar with the temple in Jerusalem and Moses and the Old Testament prophets, and this book explains how all of those Old Testament festivals and rituals are pictures that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It's like it helps us put our glasses on, so that we can see the Old Testament clearly.

So let's unpack this section of God's Word, so we can understand what God is teaching us. “*For Christ did not enter a handmade sanctuary, a representation of the true sanctuary. Instead, he entered into heaven itself, now to appear before God on our behalf.*” In the Old Testament, when Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, on their way to the Promised Land they stopped at Mount Sinai. There on the mountain, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and instructions about how the Israelites were to worship God. God told the people to make a portable worship place called the *tabernacle*. The tabernacle was the place where God met with the people. This is what it looked like: It had an outer court where anyone could come and offer sacrifices. Then it had an inner sanctuary that was divided into two sections. The first part of the sanctuary was called the “Holy Place,” and the second part was called the “Most Holy Place” or the “Holy of Holies.” The Most Holy Place was where the Ark of the Covenant was, the very presence of God.

Here's how Old Testament worship worked: Any family head could come to the outer courtyard and offer sacrifices to atone for sin. For example, you could bring a lamb or a bull, you would take it to the outer court of the tabernacle, slit the animal's throat, let the blood run out, and offer the animal as a sacrifice. God instructed his people to do this, and it was a very powerful reminder that the wages of sin is death. When there is sin, death is the payment. The book of Hebrews says, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). It was a very graphic reminder that God is deadly serious about sin; he doesn't take it lightly, and he's not messing around when he says, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

The sanctuary inside the courtyard was a special place where only the priests could go. They went into the Holy Place every day to carry out their priestly duties, burn incense, etc. But there was only one person who could enter the inner sanctuary—the Most Holy Place—and that was the High Priest. And he only went into the Most Holy Place once a year

on the Day of Atonement—*Yom Kippur*—and he could only enter carrying a bowl of blood. The High Priest sprinkled the blood on the Ark of the Covenant to make atonement for the sins of the people.

There was only one problem: Animal blood cannot pay for human sin. Countless animal sacrifices and rivers of animal blood could not remove one single human sin; it was all a graphic picture. It was all symbolic of what was coming: a greater High Priest, who would offer a greater sacrifice. It all pointed to Jesus, the Christ, the Chosen One, who did not enter a handmade sanctuary but who entered heaven itself, not to offer the blood of an animal, but to offer his own blood—holy, precious, innocent blood. *Human* blood for human sin. *Divine* blood of infinite worth to pay for the sin of the whole world.

And what Jesus did, he did once for all time. *“He did not enter to offer himself many times, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise he would have needed to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once and for all, at the climax of the ages, in order to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”* This is what Jesus did for the world when he allowed himself to be nailed to the cross. The sin of billions of human beings was laid upon Jesus the Christ of God. The oppressive guilt of countless rebellions against God was taken up by Jesus. The eternal damnation that you and I and every guilty sinner has deserved was suffered by Christ. And with one sacrifice—one sacrifice, now and forever—the sinless Lamb of God bore the sin of the world and washed all our sin away.

This is why Jesus can make this bold claim: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This is why the apostles of Jesus can say, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). A human being can either trust that Jesus has paid for sin and find refuge and forgiveness in him, or they can say, “I don’t want Jesus’ payment,” reject Jesus’ sacrifice, and pay for their sins themselves in hell. That’s what hell is: eternal payment for sins, because the person rejected the payment that Jesus already made. You don’t want what Jesus did for you? Then you can pay for your sins yourself, and the price is eternal death and everlasting separation from God.

So the writer to the Hebrews ties it all together: *“Just as it is appointed for people to die only once and after this comes the judgment, so also Christ was offered only once to take away the sins of many, and he will appear a second time—without sin—to bring salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for him.”* We call this life our “time of grace.” This is the time we have to repent of our sins, to turn away from our sins, to lose all ideas that we can make up or pay for our own sins, and to turn to Jesus Christ our Savior, who has already paid for our sins. When our life ends, our time of grace is done, and our relationship to Christ—either with Jesus or apart from Jesus—is sealed forever. When we die, then comes judgment. There are no second chances. There is no purgatory. There are no “do-overs.” There is no reincarnation and coming back for another go-around to try to get it right the second or third or however many times. You live once, you die once, and you are judged. Period. Be ready! Be ready for the big day!

Let’s bring this all into focus. The whole reason why Emmanuel Lutheran Church and School exist is to get people ready for the big day. It doesn’t matter how much money we make; Jesus asks, “What will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world but forfeits his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26). We have a Lutheran elementary school not just to offer high-quality education in a nurturing classroom environment with high academic standards and strong extracurricular programs, but to prepare our kids for the big day, so that our children and our children’s families know and trust in Jesus and hold onto him for forgiveness and eternal life. We do things like Family Fall Festival, not just so that we can have fun and dress up and decorate trunks and load up on candy and send the kids home on a sugar high. We do those things so that we can encourage one another in fellowship with fellow Christians, and so that we can introduce our community to our church and to their Savior. That’s the way it is for everything we do at church and school; it’s all about strengthening our connection to Jesus and to our fellow Christians, so that above all else, no matter what else happens, we are ready for the day of our death, ready for Judgment Day, ready to meet Jesus.

So hold onto your Savior. Our relationship with Jesus is our relationship with his Word. Drink from the water of his forgiveness regularly in your worship and personal devotional life. Pray for strength in the face of every temptation that wants to pull you away from Jesus. Remember your baptism. Receive Holy Communion regularly and feed your soul with the Bread of Life. Don’t let any distraction take your eyes off Jesus. Don’t let the big day catch you unprepared.

In Christ you are ready for the big day. Trusting in Jesus’ forgiveness, you are ready for the big day. So we join with all the church to pray, “Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly!” Amen.