

THE COMPLETION OF SALVATION AT THE LAST JUDGMENT

Zechariah 3:1-10

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

All of the sermons in our weekday Advent services have concerned Baptism and its place in God's plan of salvation. You heard from Pastor Morehouse about objective and subjective justification: how Christ died to purchase forgiveness of sins for all people, and how the Holy Spirit gives that forgiveness individually to each person who believes and is baptized. You heard from Pastor Palmer about the nature of faith, how it trusts in Christ and receives everything from Him in Baptism. You heard from Pastor Henry that God will keep and defend the baptized in the faith as you withstand the temptations and assaults of the world and the devil. Tonight, God's Word speaks to you about the completion of salvation: namely, Christ's return to judge all people.

The sermon is based primarily on the reading from Zechariah, which we just heard. Remember that the prophet Zechariah had a vision. In that vision, Joshua, who at that time was high priest of Israel, was standing before the Lord, and Satan stood at his right hand to accuse him. Like many others in the Old Testament, this vision has a dual focus. On the one hand, it records how God cleansed Joshua of his sin so that he could serve as high priest. However, the vision also serves as a

type. You may recall that Pastor Morehouse spoke about types and antitypes in his sermon on Genesis. A type is an image that points forward to something greater; that something greater is the antitype. For example, the Flood is a type of Baptism. Just as the sinful world drowned in the Flood, and righteous Noah and his family were saved, so also in Baptism God drowns our sinful natures, and makes us righteous in His sight.

Zechariah's vision, like the flood, is a type. Specifically, it is a type of the Last Judgment. "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest, standing before the angel of the LORD."¹ Joshua here represents humanity and every individual human being. Just as Joshua stood in the presence of God to be judged, so we all will one day do the same. When Christ returns in glory, we will all appear before His judgment seat.

I want to say a word about the nature of the coming judgment. "Judgment Day" in our culture has a predominately negative connotation. It evokes images of fire, destruction, the violent and terrible end of all things. Judgment Day will include God's destruction of evil and His anger at unrepentant sinners. But the Scriptures also emphasize a different aspect of the Judgment. For the faithful, the Judgment is an object of hope, and not of fear. The patriarchs, prophets, and apostles longed for God to judge the world. From Genesis to Revelation, the saints

¹ Zechariah 3:1

have always prayed fervently that God's judgment would be enacted, that He would establish perfect justice on earth. Hear again two examples from our readings:

“He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: ‘Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!’ The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!”²

“As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.”³

God's judgment is not only His verdict against the wicked, but His vindication of His saints, the people whom He has made holy in Baptism. When He comes to judge the world, Christ will give His approval before all creation of those whom He made holy through His precious blood of the new covenant. This, in fact, is the true and ultimate purpose of Judgment. God condemns evil so that He can exalt righteousness. He says “no” to sin and death that He might say “yes” to righteousness and life. It is necessary that all things be put in the place they belong. For godliness to prevail, evil must be condemned and cast out of creation. If love, purity, integrity, and holiness are to thrive, then murder, fornication, deception, and

² Psalm 50:5-6

³ Psalm 16:3-4

ungodliness must be excluded. God's promise to judge the world is His promise to put the world back into the harmony and good order with which He created it.

Because of this, creation longs for the judgment of God.

But if this is so, then why do *we* fear the Judgment? Our text gives the answer: because we are sinful. Hear what it says concerning Joshua, that he was clothed in filthy rags. As the text tells us, the dirty garments represent sin. Joshua stood before God with his unrighteousness plain to see.

We also bear the robes of iniquity. Born in original sin, inherited from Adam, we quickly turn our hands to commit every kind of evil. And if our sins alone were not enough to condemn us, we also have an implacable enemy: the devil. Satan, our adversary, desires to accuse us before God. Like a plaintiff bringing a lawsuit, the devil longs to hold our crimes before the Judge, who must punish them. "Do You see what this creature is? Do You see that it was conceived in iniquity? Do You see its foul thoughts, words, and deeds? How can You not destroy it, if You are just?"

And the devil, in his twisted way, is right. God must punish sin if He is to remain just. We fear His judgment, not because we are afraid of being condemned unjustly, but because we know our condemnation is right. As we are born in Adam, we are the evil that must be excluded for creation to be made perfect. We deserve to be cast into eternal fire with the devil and his angels.

But what is God’s response? Does He desire our condemnation? Does He long for our damnation? No! Much as we deserve it, God does not want us to be destroyed. He loves us with the strong love of a father, eager to save rather than punish. Look at how He responds to the devil when the latter accuses Joshua: “The LORD rebuke you, O Satan!”⁴ When the devil brings an accusation, God shuts him up. “This man is my creation. I have chosen to save him, as a brand is plucked from the fire.” The devil’s power lies in his ability to accuse mankind before the Father. He cannot harm God Himself, for God is impassible – in other words, He is incapable in His divine nature of suffering or loss. Therefore, all that the devil can do is to slander God’s human creatures, in the knowledge that God in His justice must punish their sin. And so, to defeat Satan and render him unable to accuse us, God purposed to send His Son into our flesh to rescue us from our sins.

. God revealed His plan of salvation to the prophet Zechariah. God proclaims that He will send “my servant the Branch,”⁵ and He declares that He will “remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.”⁶ These words prophesy of Christ’s Incarnation, His becoming man, and the unity of His divine and human natures in one person. Christ was to be a “Branch” from David’s house – that is,

⁴ Zechariah 3:2

⁵ Zechariah 3:8

⁶ Zechariah 3:9

He was to be a man descended from David. But He would also be God, since God declares, “*I will remove the iniquity of this land.*”

Zechariah’s vision preaches the truth that Jesus Christ is both God and man, having taken our flesh and blood as His own. His Incarnation was absolutely necessary for our salvation. There are many reasons for its necessity, but foremost among them is our need for atonement – a covering over and washing away of sin. Only a man could die for sin, since it is men who broke God’s Law and men whom God condemned to die. But only God could offer a ransom sufficient for the sins of the whole world. Therefore God became man, so that He would be capable of suffering and dying, and so that His sufferings and death would be enough to atone for original and actual sin.

Here is a mystery. We have said that Joshua the high priest represents each and every one of us, for we all stand before God soiled by sin. But Joshua also represents the Son of God. “Joshua” and “Jesus” are the same name; “Joshua” comes from the Hebrew, “Jesus” from the Greek. Jesus, the greater Joshua, put on our sins. Jesus, who is Righteousness itself, was clothed in – baptized into – the guilt of our iniquity. And Jesus, clothed in our sins, was stood before the Father on the cross and received the punishment, the *judgment*, which we deserve. The just wrath of God against sin was satisfied in the death of Christ. Jesus fulfilled the

promise given to Zechariah: He took away the iniquity of the whole world in a single day.

But Christ did not stay dead. His righteousness is greater than the wrath and the judgment. As the perfect man, death could not hold Him, as our Psalm says: “You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”⁷ Having been put to death in our sins, Jesus rose in glory through His own holiness. He overturned death and lives forever because of His pure and indestructible righteousness.

That righteousness He gives to you in Baptism. Hear what happened to Joshua in Zechariah’s vision: “And the angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ And to him he said, ‘Behold, I have taken your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.’”⁸ Likewise, when you were baptized, God cleansed and forgive you all of your sin, and put your sinful nature to death. And He clothed you with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, the righteousness which was and is greater than all death and condemnation.

In this righteousness you can stand before God on the Day of Judgment. The devil will not be able to accuse you, for Christ has taken away your sins and

⁷ Psalm 16:10

⁸ Zechariah 3:4

covered you with His own righteousness, and the devil cannot accuse Christ. In fact, Christ through His death and resurrection has cast the devil from heaven – there will be no prosecutor on the Last Day. Your sins will not condemn you, for their stain has been washed away. Death will not overtake you, for Jesus has conquered it by His passion. Jesus is greater than the devil, sin, and death. You need not fear the wrath of God itself as you, by faith, remain clothed with the baptismal garment of Christ’s righteousness. For you who cling to Jesus through faith, the Judgment will be, not the occasion of your destruction, but the completion of your salvation.

God has given to you who are baptized the promise He gave to Joshua: “If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.”⁹ What is the way of God but Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life? What is the charge of God, but to believe in Jesus Christ whom He has sent? And you have been baptized into Christ. As you remain in Him by faith, trusting in Him alone for the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation, God will vindicate you at the Last Judgment, as He has already done before the world when He baptized you into Christ. You will not be excluded from God’s new world, but will be a part of it. When He comes to judge the nations, you will be among the

⁹ Zechariah 3:7

redeemed who stand at His right hand and receive the inheritance prepared for you from before the world's foundation. When He remakes the earth, He will set you over it as kings and queens in Christ. When all creation sings its praises to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you will lead its worship as the true priests of God. And when God makes His dwelling among men, you will have "the right of access" to Him, just as, even now, you may approach the throne of grace in Christ. Baptized and justified in Christ, declared righteous by Him on the Last Day, you will forever be with your King who loved you and gave Himself up for you. Therefore you can wait with hope for the coming of Christ and for His judgment, knowing that His coming will not mean death for you, but eternal life. Amen.