

**Sermon Text:** Mark 13:24-37

**Occasion:** Last Sunday of the Church Year, 21 Nov 2021

### **On the Millennium**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Our gospel reading for today displayed some doom and gloom by talking about the end of the world. Yet Jesus also proclaims hope for the time of Tribulation. On the Last Day, the Son of Man will descend from the heavens and gather up those in faith from the ends of the earth. He will deliver them from the various evils that assail us. This is a great and wonderful promise our Lord gives to us. No matter what horrid evil we will face before the end, our Lord will deliver us from it—even death. Now, as to the exact day or hour this will occur, we do not know. Not even Jesus himself knew. Only the Father in heaven knows when this will come about. Until that time, we are to wait in readiness for the coming of the end—not that we will be saved by our own preparedness, but, rather, we continue in the salvation Christ gives to us. Being prepared in the faith means constantly living in faith, receiving the gifts of forgiveness and life God graciously gives through the Word and Sacraments. Jesus Christ has already saved us through the power of his cross, and he will sustain us in his salvation unto the end.

Now, even though no one knows when the Last Day will come, people try their darnedest to figure out when such a thing will happen. This knowledge won't help them, nor will it help you really. Our help lies in the Lord Himself saving us by grace through faith. Therefore, living in faith by hearing God's word and receiving the Sacraments should be our focus in this life. But that hasn't stopped many people over the centuries from trying to guess the date of Christ's second coming. Just about every generation has had a doomsday prophet of one sort or another.

More recently, within the past century or so, emphasis has shifted from knowing about when exactly the Last Day will occur to figuring out the schedule for what's going on up until the Last Day. Jesus gives us many different signs: false prophets, false Christs, wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines (Mark 13:6-8). Despite these things occurring in every period of earth's history, people try to demonstrate by the presence or absence of these factors when the end of the world is going to come and the Millennium.

There has been a lot of talk in books and religious programming about the Millennium, at least, within non-Lutheran circles. This talk about the Millennium usually concerns itself with when Jesus is returning and what to expect in the End Times. There are many different positions that you can take regarding the Millennium and the End Times, but I will only talk about four: Postmillennialism, Dispensational Premillennialism, Historic Premillennialism, and Amillennialism. It is my hope that this sermon will equip you with the knowledge you need to discern the truth about the Last Day and know your Lord is coming to deliver you from the evils

of this world. First off, I wish to say that Lutherans are Amillennialist, but I will also explore why we do not believe in the other Millennialist viewpoints.

To begin, we will go to the one and only place in scripture which talks about the Millennium. This is in Revelation 20:1-6,

*Then I [John] saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. <sup>2</sup> And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, <sup>3</sup> and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.*

*<sup>4</sup> Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup> The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.*

We see here that the Millennium is the time Satan is bound and sealed, as well as a period when Jesus Christ reigns over creation. This is said to be a period of one thousand years. Now, immediately, you might notice an issue. Is this literally 1000 years or is this figurative language? This passage comes up in the book of Revelation which is known to be figurative in its language, including when it comes to numbers. If you take the Millennium to be a literal 1000-year period, you will run into problems in interpreting Revelation. I mean, if you hold to the 1000 years to be literal, than why not also believe, as Revelation says, that only 144 000 male virgins will be saved from upon the earth (Rev 14:1-5)? We can also see “1000 years” come up in two other places in scripture. One is Ps 90:4,

*For a thousand years are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.*

The other is from 2 Peter 3:8,

*But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*

We see from all this that a thousand years is more like a turn of phrase to mean a long time rather than a literal period of 1000 years. Therefore, the Lutheran position of Amillennialism does not believe there is a literal period of 1000 years between Christ’s first coming in the manger and Christ’s second coming. Amillennialism is basically not-millennialism, similar to how “atheist”

refers to a not-theist. The Millennium for Lutherans is not a literal thousand years. We recognize that all the signs of the great Tribulation have been going on since the time of Christ and they will continue until his return. Premillennialism will disagree with this understanding, and I'll come to that, but first, I wish to talk about Postmillennialism which agrees with Lutheran Amillennialists about a figurative thousand years, although disagreeing on something else.

Postmillennialism believes in a non-literal period of 1000 years between the Ascension of Jesus Christ and the return of Jesus Christ. At the end of this unknown length of time, Christ will return to simply bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Now, if this were all Postmillennialism were saying, we would agree with it, but Postmillennialism adds something to this. It states that during the non-literal Millennium, God will bring about a golden age upon the earth so that sin and evil will be almost completely removed from earth by the time Jesus arrives from heaven. When Jesus descends, he will find an earthly, Christian paradise. While this is a nice sentiment, it does not correspond to what scripture says, nor to the state of the world exactly.

Postmillennialism thinks everything is getting better and better. It points to things like there being fewer wars at the present time than most other periods of history, and it will point to Christianity being a fast growing religion. In fact, when I was researching Postmillennialism this past week, the author I was reading<sup>1</sup> believed you can bring about Christ's return faster by spreading the Gospel faster. Therefore, all Christians should be encouraged to go out and spread God's Word to create a paradise as soon as possible.

This helps expose a problem with Postmillennialism, namely a confusion of what the Gospel is. The Gospel is that Christ saves us, not that we save the world by doing our best. Doing our best—doing good—is following God's Law, not us performing the Gospel. The Gospel is God saving us, not us saving others. Granted, as Christians, we perform God's commandments out of love, a love God gives to us through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, but this is still performing commandments, not the Gospel. In truth, God is the one working salvation, we are not. Therefore, we cannot force the salvation of the world because that is not our work but God's work. We need Him to save others and save ourselves. We recognize that we are still sinners. We are in constant need of God's grace through His Word and Sacraments, bestowing forgiveness and life to us through them. God readily supplies us with this because we are sinful and do not properly follow His will in this world. In fact, no one does as all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Rom 3:23).

Although the Postmillennialist is hopeful the world is getting better and better, it is only better in certain respects. Sinners are still sinners. Although there are fewer wars in recent history, there are still people advocating for legalized abortions and medical assistance in suicide which kill more human beings than war or genocides do. And, like genocides, people who support these things are promoting them as the ethically correct thing to do, which displays how morally

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<sup>1</sup> Loraine Boettner

disoriented people become in their sin. So, despite the world improving in some ways, our sinfulness still taints the world in others. As always, we rely on God delivering us from an evil world to bring us into a paradise free from sin. We receive this freedom in part now through the forgiveness found in God's Word and Sacrament, but we will only receive it fully when Christ comes again and brings about the new heavens and the new earth.

In summary, Postmillennialism does well to state the Millennium is not a literal 1000 years but it fails to properly account for what we would call the Tribulation. The Tribulation is the evil found in the world which Christ will rescue us from on the Last Day. So, let us now turn to the second Millennial position we need to consider.

Dispensational Premillennialism, which for simplicity's sake I will refer to as "Dispensationalism," features a lot of talk about the Tribulation. If you are familiar with the terms: rapture, post-tribulation, or pre-tribulation; all of them come from this one Millennial position. And if you heard those terms used, you know that there are many topics and positions within Dispensationalism as a whole. To make things as simple as I possibly can: Dispensationalism believes that there are different periods in history called "dispensations" where God acts toward humans in different ways. For example, during the Old Testament, God's promises of salvation only apply to the nation of Israel. Israelites are saved according to the Law. The Church in the New Testament is not the continuation of Israel but a completely separate entity which is saved through Jesus Christ and his Gospel. If you think this sounds off, that's because it is.

Dispensationalism chops up time periods in and after scripture without recognizing how God is the same yesterday, today and forever (cf. Heb 13:8). His commandments condemned all people from the beginning to today and beyond because of our sin. Salvation cannot come from the Law or by simply being attached to an ancient kingdom. All people of all time are saved through Christ alone (cf. Heb 11:39-12:2). The ancient nation of Israel is saved through Christ as the Christian Church is saved through Christ. All of us are saved by grace through faith, apart from our works or ethnicity (Eph 2:8-9). Therefore, we can also say that Dispensationalism does not quite grasp the Gospel message either.

The third Millennial position we will cover, Historic Premillennialism, provides a better system than Dispensationalism. Unlike Dispensational Premillennialism, Historic Premillennialism does not artificially divide the history of the world. Instead, Historic Premillennialism states that Christ will return to this world on the Last Day to raise Christians from the dead and then reign on the earth 1000 years before he brings about the new heavens and the new earth. At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be released from bondage to create a great Tribulation on the earth before being defeated by Christ. Then Christ will raise unbelievers from the dead for the final judgment. Until Christ comes again on the earth to reign physical, he spiritually reigns from heaven. There are issues with this view too.

Lutheran Amillennialists would say we are in the thousand years now, Premillennialists push off to some future event. In truth, Jesus is currently reigning over heaven and earth. After Jesus rose from the grave, he declared, "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matt 28:18) Jesus has already raised the faithful out of the deadness of their sins into eternal life (John 5:24; Rev 20:5). You have eternal life now which is being enriched through the grace you receive in Word and Sacrament. You await the resurrection to come when those who have died in Christ will be raised from their graves to be back in this world, but for now Christians are part of God's kingdom on both sides of the grave. We are also in the Great Tribulation already since we can see sin and suffering throughout the world. The Millennium is not some time far off but now happening.

To sum everything up: I explored four positions on the Millennium. Three (Postmillennialism, Dispensationalism, and Historic Premillennialism) could not properly describe what we read in scripture. We are left with Amillennialism which believes we are currently in a figurative Millennium and where we await Jesus Christ to descend, bringing about the resurrection and the new heavens and new earth. When this will occur, we do not know, but we do know our Lord promises to deliver us from the evil of this world. Through faith, you are saved. Continue in the faith by receiving grace in Word and Sacrament. Seek your Lord earnestly in prayer and thanksgiving. He has promised to come and deliver you from the Great Tribulation. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.