

September 25, 2022 – Luke 16:19-31

It is officially Fall. If you hadn't noticed the calendar date, you almost certainly noticed the sudden drop in temperatures this past week. 30 degrees, literally over night, occurring on the exact first day of Autumn. Of course, it didn't last. This is Missouri after all. Seasons change in fits and starts.

Nevertheless, it was a reminder of what's to come. Already it is harvest time in the fields. Football is on television. Kids are back into their school routine. Soon, trees will begin to turn. The days will grow shorter. The nights longer. Frost will be on the grass. Cider in the fridge. Soup on the stove. I love Fall.

And I love the time of the church year that we're entering into. Reformation Day. All Saints Day. Advent. Christmas. Epiphany. Lent. Holy Week. Easter. Done with the doldrums of Sunday after Sunday after Pentecost. Just as the leaves of the trees outside are changing to red, orange, and yellow, so our altar will soon be arrayed in a rainbow of colors.

But not yet. We still have one more month to go before we get a break from green. But as it turns out, we actually do have a mini-season of the church year beginning today. It's a little known time of the church, deemed so 'insignificant,' I suppose, that we don't even change the paraments.

It's known as the Season of Michaelmas. Named as such for two reasons. One, because it begins on the Sunday before St. Michael's Day, which is this Thursday. And two, because of what St. Michael represents. For the Archangel Michael is the one who will announce the return of Jesus Christ with a great call to all the world and who will personally slay the antichrist and gather God's people.

And so the season of Michaelmas is when we focus on "the end." On the end of the church year. On the end times of our world as we know it. And on our own mortal end, whenever that may be.

And I think that may be exactly why the church has so readily dismissed Michaelmas from its celebrations and liturgical calendar year overall. For we as human beings and our society as a whole do not like to talk about the end.

Oh sure, we love to talk about "just before the end." Tim Lahaye, Jerry Jenkins, David Jeremiah, John Hagee, and countless other pastors, televangelists, and Christian personalities have made an entire industry out of discussing "just before the end." Of speculating about the interpretation of Daniel and the Revelation. Of vividly capturing the images contained therein. Of finding sign after sign after sign of the end times upon us.

But it's not quite as popular to talk about what happens next. Of the other side of the judgment. Of a very real heaven and hell, and a very real place of punishment and of blessing. Perhaps that's because only a little more than half of Americans believe that hell exists at all. Compared to the 75%, 85%, or more, depending on the poll, who believe in heaven.

Truth be told, Americans, much like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, need to be confronted with the reality of hell and God's judgment in the most vivid terms. And that's exactly what Jesus is doing in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus has just finished an extensive sermon before a motley crowd. Tax collectors, prostitutes, criminals, the worst of the worst. And there, mixed among them, disdainfully rubbing shoulders with these "sinners," are the Pharisees.

And they've all just heard some of Jesus' most memorable parables. The lost sheep, whom the Good Shepherd risks everything to rescue. The lost coin, found by the diligent woman. The prodigal son, who rejects his Father, but is nevertheless welcomed home with rejoicing. All three are stories which I'm sure the Pharisees think are targeting the sinners in Jesus' audience. Those other people are lost. The Pharisees are fine.

But Jesus turns the tables on them. He tells them the story we heard last week of the shrewd manager, who gives away his master's money, but in doing so gains his master's favor. And then he tells them flat out, "You cannot love both God and money. God knows your sinful hearts. And what you exalt is an abomination in his sight."

And the Pharisees suddenly realize that he is talking to them. That he is saying that they are just as lost as the tax collectors and prostitutes. That he is talking to the men in fine clothes with extravagant homes and money to spare who don't even bother to look out their own front door to see people in need.

And they don't like it one bit. How dare he call them out? How dare he call them sinners? After all, what judgment could God have in store for them? They are the children of Abraham. There is no such thing as hell for good Jews like them.

They don't like the idea that God has a judgment in store for them any more than most Americans do. Any more than most of us here do, actually. Because the reality is, most of us live pretty comfortable lives.

We stress about bills and we covet the new toy our neighbor owns and we worry about the future, but compared to the truly poor of this world, we are quite rich and they are Lazarus on our doorstep. Which means we are left facing a harsh standard: *"Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish."*

That statement should give us pause. It should inspire little fear of the Lord in us. Is my comfort now an advance on God's riches in heaven? One that I will soon have to forfeit? It certainly sounds like it.

Thankfully, that's not where Jesus concludes this parable. Seeking their own comfort at the expense of the poor around them is certainly one of the places where the Pharisees have gone wrong. Where they deserve to be lumped in with the sinners around them. And frankly, that's where we have gone wrong many times as well.

But ultimately, that's not the greatest crime that the rich man of the story committed. That's not what condemned him to hell. That's not what condemned the Pharisees to hell.

What condemned them to hell was that they had been told this time and time again and refused to listen. That the writings of Moses had told him, "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor." That the writings of the prophet Isaiah had told them, "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

That our own Old Testament lesson for today had warned them, *"Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves out on their couches..."* while they indulge in every sort of luxury... *"but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph."* Over their own neighbor's suffering. They had Moses and the Prophets. They had God's Word. And they refused to repent.

What condemned the Pharisees to hell was that a man really did rise from the dead to convince them of their impending judgment and they still didn't listen. And that is exactly where we have an opportunity to be different from those that the Lord condemned. That is where we have an opportunity to listen to the words of Scripture, not simply to hear the Law, but the amazing Gospel of Jesus Christ as well.

That is where we have an opportunity to listen to the words of Moses, not simply to hear "Love your neighbor," but also that Jesus will crush the serpent's head. To listen to the words of Isaiah, not simply to hear, "Learn to do right," but also that "the virgin will be with child and he will be called Immanuel, God with us." To listen to the words of a man who has risen from the dead, not simply to hear about the wrath of God, but also that he experienced death for us so that we might not have to.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is about our end. It is about God's judgment. His very real judgment on all of mankind. But buried in those words of judgment are the hope we have at our end. The words of Moses and the Prophets. The words of a man who came back from the dead.

The Word of God made flesh and dwelling among us is the hope that we have at the end. It is the comfort for sinners who fear God and repent when confronted by their sin. For whoever believes His words shall not perish, but have eternal life. Amen.