

6.2.2019 Sunday after the Ascension (1 Peter 4:7-11)

*“The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer”* (1 Peter 4:7).

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit Ford’s Theater in Washington D.C., the building where President Lincoln was shot, and then I walked across the street to see the Petersen House where he died nine hours later. Every year about one million people tour the place where our sixteenth president was assassinated, a testament to the fascination so many of us have with Lincoln’s remarkable life and tragic death.

President Lincoln was a man who faced difficult challenges in every stage of his life, a life that began in a one room log cabin on the Kentucky frontier. Lincoln’s father was a stern, often unfair disciplinarian, and his mother who he loved dearly, died a painful death before his tenth birthday. As the years progressed Lincoln struggled with severe depression, a condition worsened by the death of one of his sons at age three and another at the age of eleven, and when he was elected president he assumed the leadership of a fractured nation that would soon be entrenched in the bloodiest war in American history, one that pitted brother against brother and led to the deaths of 625,000 American soldiers.

As I sat in Ford’s Theater looking up at the Presidential box and reflecting on the events of the day of his assassination, I couldn’t help but think that Lincoln was a man who could not escape the difficult realities of this earthly life. History suggests that in every chapter of his life Lincoln was forced to confront another very real trial or sorrow, and as you know that night in our nation’s capital was no different, though for a moment it must have seemed to Lincoln that his greatest trials were now behind him. He’d been re-elected and was two months into his second term as President, six days earlier General Lee had surrendered to General Grant effectively ending the Civil War, and now here he sat with his wife Mary, the two of them celebrating and enjoying the last act of a hilarious comedy. How he must have cherished this opportunity to laugh out loud with the audience, entirely unaware that the end was at hand, that death was waiting on the other side of a closed door.

Lincoln was a man who could not escape the difficult realities of this earthly life, and I speak of him this morning because I believe the story of his life helps us recognize the importance and the relevance of the inspired words found in our Epistle. St. Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote, *“The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer”* (1 Peter 4:7). When you read this verse, and our Epistle in its entirety, the first thing you may notice is that these words are part of a letter written first and foremost to a particular people at a particular moment in history. Peter is writing to the early Church, the people to whom Jesus spoke this dire warning found in the Gospel, *“They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service”* (John 16:2). Peter certainly had these words in mind, as well as Jesus’ prophecy concerning the destruction of the Temple and the end of their nation, when he wrote, *“The end of all things is at hand...”* From our vantage point two thousand years later, we see exactly how these prophecies were fulfilled in the lives, and in the deaths, of the first Christians.

In hindsight it’s easy to recognize the fact that these prophetic words were truly inspired by the Holy Spirit and contained a particular and important message for the first Christians, and so the question we find ourselves asking today is this: What message does God intend to communicate to us as we read this letter two thousand years later? I would suggest this passage of Holy Scripture means as much to us in our day and in our culture as it did to the early Church, for this letter contains this urgent warning that everyone truly needs to hear: *“The end of all things is at hand.”*

The truth is for each us, in one way or another, the end of all things is at hand. In the Bible we read about the way this truth was demonstrated in Jesus’ prophecy concerning the destruction of the Temple and in the martyrdom of countless Christians. In books of history we read about the way this truth was demonstrated in the stories of our most famous heroes, like Lincoln, who lived remarkable lives - that all ended in death, and in our own experience we’ve seen this truth demonstrated when we mourn the death of those we love and visit their graves grieving the loss of physical connection that we once shared with them. If you stop for even a moment to consider the message of the Bible, the pages of history, or your own personal experience you will find there is no denying the truth that the end of all things which

belong to this earthly life is truly always at hand, but the great majority of people will not stop to consider such facts, for this message that God inspired Peter to communicate is one that the world, and especially our culture, does not want you to contemplate.

The world would have you believe that the end of all things is nowhere in sight, that your life and the world as we know it will continue indefinitely, but that's not what God tells us. His Holy Word tells us that the end of all things is at hand, and that we should face this reality by living our lives in accordance with the truth that He has revealed to us. This Epistle calls us to prepare ourselves for that end, which for those who love God is best described as a great beginning that starts when this earthly life is over, a great beginning that we may see as just another chapter in the eternal, abundant life that has already begun.

Listen to how St. Peter tells us to prepare for *the end of all things*. He writes, "... *be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging. As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God*" (1 Peter 4:7b-10). What kind of life does God call us to live knowing that the end of all things is at hand? He calls us to a life dedicated to loving and serving one another. He tells us to pray for others, to pray for their conversion, for His grace to rest upon them, and for their Salvation. He tells us to forgive one another in love, for "*hatred stirs up strife: but love covers all sins*" (Proverbs 10:12; 1 Peter 4:8), and God tells us to show hospitality to one another without grumbling, and to use the various gifts that He has given us to serve one another in love, proving ourselves to be good stewards of His amazing grace. These things we do and this life we live, we live by the grace of God and in the strength of God "*in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 4:11).

This is the message presented in our Epistle, and while it may not be easy, it's certainly simple. In a nutshell, St. Peter tells us that *the end of all things is at hand*, therefore glorify God and set your affection on His kingdom by loving and serving and giving your life in sacrificial service to God and neighbor. Wake up every morning ready, willing, and by the grace of God

able to pay any price to serve Jesus, knowing that the worst thing that can happen to you leads directly to the best thing that can happen to you. This thought brings us back to where we began, with Lincoln.

President Lincoln was a man who struggled for years with questions about the existence of God, the truth of Holy Scripture, and the relevance of the Christian faith. In one of his biographies we read that he was a man who “had once hated God, had felt tortured and rejected by Him, like Job of old, but ultimately and through a process of years, Lincoln came to see God as good and just. He learned to rely on His comfort, trust in His guidance, and stand in awe of His perfect judgments.” According to his widow, Lincoln’s last words were of his desire to see Israel. As they sat in the balcony of Ford’s Theater, he told her, “We will visit the Holy Land and see those places hallowed by the footsteps of the Savior. There is no place I so much desire to see as Jerusalem.”

Lincoln planned to visit Jerusalem and walk in the footsteps of his Savior, but as we read in Scripture, “*You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes*” (James 4:14), or in other words, *the end of all things is at hand*. Lincoln’s story helps us recognize that we only have today to love God and our neighbor. We only have today to share His Word and plant seeds for His kingdom. We only have today to live for Him and with Him and in Him. Lincoln’s remarkable life, his enduring legacy, and his last words (which expressed his love for our Lord) are evidence that he was a man who lived for God today. May we follow his good example in order that we may face the end of all things resting in the knowledge that the worst thing that can happen to us leads directly to the best thing that can happen to us. For in the end, in the *twinkling of an eye*, those who put their trust in the Lord will join the saints and angels in perfect and everlasting union with Almighty God in His heavenly kingdom.