

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 9 -- August 11th and 14th, 2011

Joel 3:12-16

“Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow— so great is their wickedness!” Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Dear children of God,

The prophet Joel calls all to come to **“the Valley of Jehoshaphat”**, also called **“the valley of decision.”** So, for the next little bit, picture yourself there! If you think this is just a game of “let’s pretend” and not worthy of your time to play “make believe”, realize that this is not the stuff of fairy tales or blockbuster movies like “The Lord of the Rings”. This is future *reality*, maybe even what will take place yet today, according to God’s timetable. This is God’s way of describing for us, through the prophet Joel, the setting of Judgment Day which we will all face someday. So,

Sermon Theme: Be Prepared For The Final Battle!

1. **We are on the winning side**
2. **God has given us the victory**

In order that we can better understand our text for today from Joel chapter 3, first, I want to tell you about one of the most amazing battles in history, and it is recorded for us in 2 Chronicles 20. Yes, it was an amazing battle, but then again, it wasn’t much of a battle. What I mean, is God’s people never swung a sword or raised a shield, but yet their entire enemy army was destroyed. It happened during the reign of King Jehoshaphat, who was king over the nation of Judah. As he was residing at his palace in Jerusalem, some of his people came to tell him of a vast enemy army that was attacking Judah from the southeast. Every report made it crystal clear—there is no way Judah would be able to stand against this army.

So, King Jehoshaphat gathered God's people together at the temple and he began to pray. Included in his prayer were these words: **“We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you”** (2 Chronicles 20:12). Through one of his prophets God responded to Jehoshaphat and to his people, **“Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s”** (2 Chronicles 20:15). Early the next morning, Jehoshaphat appointed men to walk in front of the army and to sing praises to God saying, **“Give thanks to the Lord. His love endures forever”** (2 Chronicles 20:21). God then caused the vast enemy army, which was comprised of three different nations, to turn on itself! And as they did, they literally destroyed each other to the last man. 2 Chronicles tells us, **“When the men of Judah came to the place that overlooks the desert and looked toward the vast army, they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground; no one had escaped”** (2 Chr. 20:24). Oh what must have went through their minds as they saw this! Their enemy was destroyed and they were saved without them doing a thing! Oh how powerful and victorious was their God!

I tell you all this, because it is the site of that amazing battle that Joel references as he speaks the words of our text for today. Yes, Joel in our text pictures the day of Christ’s return and talks about it as if it were taking place in the same Valley of Jehoshaphat. Why? Because like the battle we just described,

the last Judgment is going to be a time when God's people are going to enjoy the greatest victory without doing a thing, and also a day when God's enemies will be thoroughly destroyed, but again, without God's people doing a thing.

So let's take a closer look at this final battle. You are not alone in **"the valley of decision"**, far from it! There are **"multitudes"** there. If you thought the crowds at the State Fair or a Brewer Game were large, you haven't seen anything yet! **"All the nations"** have been assembled, Joel tells us. **"All who are in their graves will hear [God's] voice and come out"**, Jesus says (Jn 5:28,29). All the living and all the dead are roused and brought before the LORD in **"the valley of decision"**.

Lines are drawn; sides are chosen. Because we do not know the exact numbers on each side, you will simply represent them based on which side of the church you are sitting today. On this side (pulpit side) are those in this text who are called **"Israel"**. This refers to God's chosen people, not as a nation or nationality, but as those who believe in the one true God and the salvation he brings.

On this side (lectern side) are those who do not believe in the one true God. These are the unbelieving nations that oppressed God's people Israel. These are the ones within the nation of Israel who remain impenitent over their sins. These are the ones who will be trampled like **"grapes— so great is their wickedness!"**

The battle gear is put on by both sides. Those on this side (pulpit side) are outfitted with **"the robe of righteousness"** (Is 61:10), a sacred and secure garment given to them at the time of their baptism. It is purely a gift of God's amazing grace. It covers their sinfulness and portrays the purity of Jesus.

Those on this side (lectern side) have rejected this glorified garment and are wearing their own temptation-tattered, sin-stained uniforms. They are confident, yet condemned, in their clothing of conceit, garments of greed, robes of rebellion, suits of self-righteousness.

Surprisingly, no weapons are needed for this battle. The Old Testament prophets Micah (4:3) and Isaiah (2:4) assure those on this side (pulpit side) that peace and victory are theirs by telling them, **"they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks"**. God's people know that they do not need weapons because Jesus has already won the battle for them with the strength of his sinless life and the power of his substitutionary death.

Those on this side (lectern side), as told by the prophet Joel, do just the opposite and **"beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears."** God's enemies have been trusting in themselves all along to win the battle for eternal life and they will assemble in **"the valley of decision"** armed for battle, thinking they still have a fight on their hands, but they cannot fight to change their eternal destiny. Their judgment is sealed.

The weather is also a factor. The **"sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine...the earth and the sky will tremble."** These catastrophic changes in creation will reveal **"the day of the LORD"** in an unmistakable manner. The most important thing to know about this battle is that the outcome is already decided. The decision taking place in this valley has already taken place back in eternity. The **"LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem"** as he makes it known to all that **"whoever does not believe [in Jesus] stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son"** (Jn 3:18). What God warned them about throughout their lives by means of his law, but they rejected, they now experience firsthand. How horrible for those on this side (lectern side) to hear this roaring and thundering judgment of God brought down on them for all eternity! Meanwhile, on this side (pulpit side) there is peace and joy as they view the reality that **"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"** so that **"whoever believes in him is not condemned"** (Jn 3:17,18). **"The LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel."** Those who believe in the Lord, regardless of nationality or skin color, age or gender, receive his final judgment that victory over Satan and salvation from sin is theirs in full!

How comforting for those on this side (pulpit side) of the church! According to our illustration today, you are the ones going to heaven because Jesus has won the victory for you and you trust in him for your salvation. But what about those on the other side (lectern side)? Are you (pulpit side)

compassionate toward them? As your sworn enemies, you can simply conclude that their fate is sealed and you do not need to help them in any way. On Judgment Day, in **“the valley of decision”**, this is true because it will be too late to turn anyone away from their unbelief. But until that day comes, it is not too late! We are to work to proclaim the gospel from shore to shore, from nation to nation, from one end of the earth to the other. May the love of Jesus, who loved you and gave himself for you, move you to love both those who are already on God’s victorious army and those who presently are not so that many more will be among those who can claim membership in the **“Israel”** of faith and find in the LORD **“a refuge and a stronghold”**.

Your eternal resting place does not depend on which side of the church on which you sat today. Be assured that God has made you all members of the winning team by granting you the faith to trust in Jesus as your Savior! Be prepared for the final judgment by continuing to trust God then to take care of you in the best way--- his way--- until he ends your life or ends the life of this world and brings you safely to heaven for eternity. Eternal victory is yours through Jesus your Judge, your King, your Savior