**Prepared to Rejoice**

Based on [John 16:16-22](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Jn16.16-22)

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Fourth Sunday of Easter ~ Jubilate

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

Many of us haven’t seen one another since the gathering restrictions were imposed by our government. I had never felt compelled to cancel a church service in my life until that day. It made me wonder when we would be able to gather again and share the Lord’s Supper, and to see one another..

On the night of the first supper, Jesus said to his disciples “**A little while and you will see me no longer; and again a little while and you will see me**.” He was preparing them for his absence. It is strange to think of God’s absence. He is always everywhere filling all things. So here it is helpful that Jesus doesn’t really speak of his absence as such, but of his visibility. “A little while and you will see me no longer”.

We are now in a time where we do not see Jesus. He is our shepherd, but we don’t see his shepherding of us. You see, this is the reason he has built his church...what we call his “visible church.” So that, in the ministry of the church, he may visibly shepherd us. He famously says to Peter after his resurrection, “Do you love me? Shepherd my sheep.”

In one sense the church consists of all believers in christ...whether they know one another or not. That is the invisible church. But the visible church is the gathering of the saints in a particular location to hear God’s word preached and his sacraments rightly administered. And ideally they have a shepherd, a pastor, who has been called and ordained to feed them these things. We cannot see faith, or the multitude of saints across the globe. They are an abstraction to us, a theory. But when we see the church gather and do ceremonially what Christ has commanded us to do, we make his ministry visible, and we know he is working because he promised to be with us and bless us then and there.

Now we know that, even outside of the walls of the visible church, God is working, advancing the fortunes of His people, and working all things for our good. Scripture discloses what the arc of history will be and how it will end; but we can only guess at God’s specific purpose for things that happen in the world. God hides himself in all things, and he works in a mysterious way. For instance, we know generally that this and every pandemic is a sign that Jesus’ coming is near. That is the inevitable arc of history. But what God is doing through this one pandemic we don’t know. Is he preparing us for a bigger one to come? Is he gathering the nations against a common enemy? Is he setting the stage for an economic famine? Is he exposing the vanity of human planning and speculation?

Perhaps He is doing any or all of these, we can’t know for certain. But what we can know for certain is that he is using this crisis to draw his church closer to him, and to drive the world farther away. For the faithful, this crisis shows just how weak and ignorant mankind really is. It shows us that there is no help without God’s help. *But for the faithless*, it causes panic. In their minds they think there is no God to help them or care for them. They think “we have to help ourselves in this crisis...and I hope we can pull it off.” They turn to the powers they know, government and money to save them. The fool says in his heart their is no God. The fool trusts the wisdom of government and the wealth of riches. The fool thinks his plans will outsmart the mysterious plans of God. But we know that God is working for one purpose...our repentance and our faith. He is working so that, when the Son of man comes again--when he is seen again--he will find faith on the earth.

Until then, he gives us a visible place where we can go to receive his grace and blessing. We go to where his flesh is present for us on earth. We go to the Lord’s Supper. There, though we see bread and wine, we see His body and blood given and she for us for the forgiveness of sins. We have not seen him for a little while, but we will see him again...either when the reaction to this pandemic is dialed down and we gather, or else we will see him in paradise should *our death* or *his coming* happen first.

Jesus *prepares* his disciples for all things. He tells them and us of the end of the world and the calamity that precedes it, and says “see, I have told you beforehand.” He also prepared his disciples for his death and resurrection, and his ascension saying “A little while and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” It's like a doctor, before he gives a child an injection, *prepares* them saying “this might hurt a little, but it will be over before you know it.” So too, the trials we face in this life would be terrifying if they were to catch us off guard and unprepared, but our Lord prepares us by telling us what to expect and also assuring us that we will rejoice in the outcome.

On my deathbed, I would like to say these same words of comfort to my family. “A little while and you will see me no longer; and again a little while and you will see me.” Because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, every person who faces death knows that death is an absence, not extinction. There is sorrow in absence and distance, but it is temporary. The grief of seeing the death of a loved one would be unbearable, except that we know death is just a sleep, a visible removal of the person whom you will see again in heaven. In a little while they will not see me, but they will see me again. Death has been disarmed and we are prepared to rejoice, thanks to the forgiveness won by the Lamb of God for us.