

"Well Equipped to Face the Crisis"

The First Sunday in Advent
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;
1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“EEEEEEEEENNNNNNNKKKKKK! That’s the really annoying sound, Uncle Stu. It’s much worse than Code Blue or the tornado warning.” My nephew Jamie was explaining to me crisis preparation at his middle school. He had come over to see what I was doing while I was at his home on Friday, trying to write the sermon for this morning. When he asked me what it was about, I told him it was sort of preparing for the crisis at the end of the world. So he shared with me some of the preparations he, his teachers and fellow classmates practiced, should there ever be such a crisis at his school.

The most annoying alarm, he told me, was the fire alarm (I did my best to reproduce it as he did). The instructions were clear. The students were to leave the burning building; they were to assemble at prearranged locations; and they were to stand with their backs to the school.

For a tornado, the drill was to go to the central hallways of the school, curl up and crouch down against the walls.

And code blue. Code blue was the alarm to be used should the school come under armed assault. Lights were to be extinguished, blinds lowered, doors locked, and everyone was to stay absolutely still.

I found the cold code blue scenario almost surreal. Children in our schools practicing for the very real possibility of others armed with pistols, rifles, assault weapons, attacking the school, killing their classmates, venting their uncontrollable rage and anger . . . what has become of us? What was not so long ago completely unthinkable is now prepared for in our schools. Unthinkable.

That’s what we want to say about the end of the world, isn’t it? Unthinkable. Preposterous. Something that will never happen. I guess it’s both realistic and fair to say that we’re a bit jaded by the whole end of the world, Judgment Day thing. After all, Christmas is just around the corner, isn’t it? You can already hear the carols in the malls, the decorations are up in the stores and on the streets. And the Christmas trees are out there (I don’t know how many cars we passed coming home from Virginia this weekend, cars coming the other way carrying trees to be decorated).

Christmas. That's the sort of coming of Christ in the world that we can handle, isn't it? The sort of incarnation that we're more than comfortable with. But the church, the community of faith, you and I, had best take a hard and honest look at what Jesus is getting at in this morning's lesson, at what Isaiah was trying to proclaim. For the way God's future unfolds, and where we will be in it, is crucial for us, isn't it?

In today's gospel, Mark records Jesus' warnings to a select group of disciples, Peter, James, John and Andrew. And He talks about just such an event, the cataclysmic end of creation. It's coming, make no doubt about it. The end of time, when God's plan of salvation will be fulfilled.

I know we're very familiar with the notion: the sheep getting separated from the goats; the raining down of hellfire and brimstone; the end of the world. But I think it's fair to say if not for us, at least for many, many people, it's sort of science-fiction fantasy. It's the type of thing that television evangelists have indulged in, the type of thing that sells pulp novels like hotcakes, gobbled up by impressionable people who haven't a hope of separating fact from fiction. For us, some sort of alarmist, exaggerated notion; the sort of alarmist notion used by so-called ministers of the gospel whose design is to scare the earthly life out of us so that the heavenly life might fill the vacuum it leaves.

But that wasn't the way it was for the people in Jesus' time, and maybe it's not the way it should be for us. For the people in Jesus' time, the people to whom Mark wrote his gospel, these words were both instructive and comforting. They spoke to the faithful, the frightened, the persecuted, in the minority; those who had to worship in secret for fear of being discovered and thereby losing their lives. For those faithful, these words of Jesus were comforting. When the whole mayhem of the world was over and done with, Christ would gather them into His presence. So it spoke of the necessary preparedness Christ's followers should have to greet Him when He returned. And second Mark spoke of the cosmic getting even, a comeuppance for those who persecuted the faithful or abandoned the community of faith.

Abandoning the faith? Quitting the community? Giving up on Christ? It's something people do all the time. But in Mark's account, he seems to be addressing a much more insidious type of abandonment, not something quite so bold and open and obvious, but something like falling asleep on the job. Remember Jesus' story about those bridesmaids, five of whom didn't have enough oil for their lamps? When the bridegroom turned out to be late, and while they scattering around, he arrived and they were locked out. It happens later in this gospel, when Jesus takes a few of the disciples with him to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, but every time he comes back to them, they've fallen asleep.

So it is that the gospel this morning is addressing a sort of inattentive discipleship, not some sort of deliberate abandonment, but a sort of halfway, comfortable, lack of commitment way for Christ. The sort of commitment that comes to see attendance at worship as optional; that fails to see the very real requirement of committing one's time, one's talent, one's whole self to being a disciple of Christ; and finding tithing something just too great or too much to even attempt. This is more a form of human complacency than it is one of deliberately abandoning the faith.

The same sort of complacency we struggle with seems to be reinforced by the foolish announcements we hear so often regarding the end of the world and the bizarre preparations taken by some of those who make those announcements. How many stunningly stupid examples have we seen in our own time? That group of followers in California who took their own lives in order to be ready to hitch themselves up to Halley's Comet and be orbited into eternal life? You know the sort of thing that gets the headlines on the television news, and the lurid pictures and details that we see on the supermarket tabloids.

Little wonder that such nonsensical stuff, coupled with what Mark even says in his gospel, leads us to be pretty apathetic about Judgment Day should it arrive. What is it that Mark said? Before the generation to whom he wrote had died off the Day of Judgment would come. Well it clearly hasn't, has it? On the other hand, let's not forget the five foolish bridesmaids. Just because the day hasn't arrived is no clear indication that it won't come.

But wait a second. Is that what Jesus is really getting at in the gospel? Or is there something even more profound that He's attempting to proclaim? Notice what He says: About that day or that hour, no one knows. Not the angels. Not Jesus, Himself. Certainly not some idiot in America proclaiming the end of the world. But only God Himself knows.

And then Jesus tells this interesting story of the house-sitter. A house-sitter, of all people! Someone hired to look after the house; someone who has full reign of the property, and has to keep everything ready for the property owner to return home.

Have you ever house-sat? No matter if you haven't. Do you remember the first time your parents left you home, alone? No, I don't mean like McCauley Calkin. You know, the time your folks went shopping or visiting or whatever, and you were left alone at home, looking after the place. Do you remember how delicious it was when they drove out of the driveway? You could turn up the volume on your CD player the way you always wanted it! You could eat as many cookies out of the pantry as you desired. You could drop things around when you'd finished with them. You could invite over some friends. Oh, you weren't that bad, but somehow, without really meaning it to happen, things got mussed up, and the next thing you knew, Mom and Dad were coming through the kitchen door. That may not have happened to you, but I recall it clearly in my life.

You see, I think that's the sort of inattentiveness and "coming back" that Jesus is really talking about. It's paying attention to what we're doing, that's what's the point, and how we're living.

You see, maybe some of you were really alert and attentive and really good kids. You cleaned up everything; you turned down the volume; you sort of ruffled up the cookies in the cookie jar so that they didn't look quite so depleted. And then, in a stroke of genius, you had a plate of cookies on the table, along with a glass of milk, if you couldn't quite brew the coffee. And when your parents came home, they loved you for it.

Do you see what Jesus is about? He's trying to give us a sort of wake up call, to sharpen us up, to get us back into the job of being disciples. It means calling us back to actually living as He would have us live, every day of our lives, not only the Sunday hour at church. Not only Sunday, but in the very way we conduct our lives daily; in the very way we execute our work; and what we pay for. Jesus calls us back to be His people, no matter what. He calls us back to Him, to be daily in prayer – not the advisory sort, you know God, it would be nice if this happened and that happened and I won the lottery and Aunt Jean had a new house, etc., etc., etc. Not the advisory sort of prayer, but the type of prayer that pleads with God to be present to us in our lives; that how we act and think and have our being will reflect Him; that through us He can touch those we meet; that through us He might be enabled to make His difference in the world, calling us back to weekly worship and to the fiscal freedom that comes by putting Him first as we deal with our money. He calls us to pay attention to how He would have us live our lives. And it's amazing how simply that can be forgotten.

Stay awake, Jesus says, keep alert. Be on task. Keep focused. That's what He's saying. Don't you understand Jesus is saying to us, haven't you got it yet? You see, the plain truth is that Jesus is currently at the right hand of God (wherever that is) and we're in charge of creation. The whole kit and caboodle is in our hands. If Christ is to be present to the world, it's going to be through you and me. We've been left home alone, to look after the house; you and I, the stewards of creation, the children of god.

So the question is, what is our life of discipleship really like? How is the housekeeping of our faith? Is it something that we've sort of put off, hoping we can take care of it at the last moment? Or is it something that we will delight in Him finding when He returns, flawed though it may be? And there is revealed the paradox of this lesson and the parable. In telling us to be alert, in telling us to be living our Christian life, in calling us to attend our responsibilities, lo and behold we're awake and watchful. As we take up our responsibilities, as we come into His presence in worship every Sunday, as we reach out to love neighbors as ourselves, as we open our hearts to strangers (even though others would suggest they have no business coming forth or belonging to the community of faith), as we do those things, we are watching for Him until He comes. And come He will.

So we're left, something like the staff and students at Jamie's school. They continue to practice so that they might be well equipped and fully prepared to deal with whatever crisis when it comes; that they will be equipped and prepared when it arrives.

Amen.