

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you been through the cycle of the church year as many times as I have, and some of you have been through the cycle many more times that I have, you come to expect the apocalyptic texts that show up toward the end of the church year. We've been easing into them in recent weeks, but we are finally there today in our gospel reading from Mark's 13<sup>th</sup> chapter. We only get 8 verses of that chapter. There are 29 more that we will not get to that are all about the end times. As I said, you come to expect these readings, and maybe even to dread them. And maybe that's because they can seem to be piling on on top of other uneasiness we're feeling. Some of that uneasiness is personal and seasonal, some of it is national and global, political and existential, and some of it might be specific to this congregation its future. I'm going to hit all three of those areas in the next few minutes. I'm going to name the uneasiness we might be experiencing in all of these areas, and then I'm going to try to help us identify how we are called to deal with these different areas of stress and crisis – what is the hope and the promise we have to see us through them.

So first, the personal and seasonal. Some of you are prone to depression as the days shorten and the nights lengthen. Seasonal affective disorder is the name that's been given, and for some it can be debilitating. And for others it's the stress of the holidays that rears its head as a potential crisis: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years. There are the sometimes contentious family gatherings, the high expectations of making things special, the pressure of all the extra responsibilities of food preparation, decorating, and hosting friends and family. All of this can become overwhelming. And then on the other side there is the post-holiday let-down, when it's all over, when everyone has gone home and it's back to the routine of daily life.

Then second, beyond our personal and family dramas, there are the crises on the national and global levels. There's political crisis in this country – the polarization of the parties, the nastiness in political rhetoric, the loss of decorum and statesmanship, and the sense that our experiment in democracy might be failing. Extremist voices that we thought were safely in our past have reemerged and been emboldened in recent years. And then even beyond our national issues there is emerging crisis of climate change, which is becoming harder to ignore, and even more urgent than we previously guessed. If we don't take action soon we may be creating a catastrophic future for much of the world's population.

And then, third, there's concern here in this congregation about our future. The council spent a lot of time this week agonizing over the budget. For the fourth time in as many years we are faced with a significant deficit budget. We are not receiving enough in contributions to support the ministry we have decided to undertake in the way we have decided to undertake it. We have been able to weather those deficit budgets either by being understaffed or by dipping into our reserves. But something has to change in the near future, because those reserves are running out. We will either have to significantly increase our contributions or we will have to significantly cut our expenses in some very painful ways. It's just that simple.

And then there is the issue of our houses, which is not directly related to our budget issues, at least at the moment, but that could change soon. They are supposed to at least pay for themselves while we hold on to them for potential future development of the land to the west of us here, but that model is not working any more and we will have to make some decisions – either to find a way to keep them that does not burden the congregation and its mission, or sell them in

favor of a focus on mission that is not so tied to dreams of a bigger and better building. Expect to hear from the council soon about this. We'll want everyone involved in making this decision.

So what shall we do, then, given these various areas of unease – personal, national, global, congregational? What is our calling? How shall we live into the future? The bottom line in difficult times – even end of the world times as identified in our texts today – is two-fold. We are counseled by Jesus to not be led astray and to remain faithful – those two things. On Reformation Sunday we were reminded once again, in that wonderful reading from Jeremiah 31, of God's promise of a new covenant written on our hearts, the covenant of God's love for us that frees us from the power of sin, death, and evil to love one another. And we were reminded that by the power of the Holy Spirit the risen Christ even now is at work fulfilling that promise in us.

Because of that we are freed from the burden of saving ourselves and freed to live wisely and sacrificially on behalf of others. We may find ourselves choosing to give up old ways of doing things in order make way for new possibilities. Can you imagine changing family traditions that have become a burden, or at least sharing the burden around the family so that it doesn't just fall on a few? Can you imagine not pushing the buttons of your sensitive family members, or not allowing them to push yours? Can you imagine not reacting so reflexively to those whom you disagree with politically? Making connections with them in areas where you can agree? Or just recognizing them as fellow human beings, even if you know they're absolutely wrong in the politics. Can you imagine changing your way of life for the sake of the planet and future generations, giving up some of your comfort in order to save energy? President Jimmy Carter asked us to think about doing that 40 years ago - not heating our houses as warmly in the winter, putting on a sweater instead of cranking up the thermostat. And he ended up being a one-term president, because we as a nation were simply not willing to consider making personal sacrifices. But imagine what might have happened had we listened - had we started working in earnest in the late 70s on weaning ourselves off of fossil fuels. Maybe our climate crises wouldn't be as bad as it is now. Or how about this. Could you imagine giving more of your time, talent, energy, and treasure in support of this congregations mission? Some of you are already there, in the above and beyond category. But many of us could do more. Money is a big part of that, but even more important is a renewed focus on personal faith. Because I'm convinced that when faith is at the center, everything else follows.

So, again, we are called to not be led astray and to be faithful, those two things. And they are linked. That *doesn't* mean we shouldn't take crises seriously. It *does* mean we shouldn't go following after solutions that will lead us away from being faithful to our calling, that compromise our trust in Jesus Christ and values that follow. Be faithful and be prepared to make sacrifices. Be faithful and be prepared for things to change. Be faithful even when things get difficult and painful. Be faithful and remember that we are not alone. Christ himself has walked this path before us. He has blazed the way through the worst that the powers of sin, death, and evil can deal out, and yet he remained faithful. And because of that, God's kingdom is going to come. God will win the world back. God's mission will succeed. But more about that next Sunday on Christ the King Sunday. In the mean time, may God be with each of us this week, in our celebrating and in our stress, in our family time, good and bad, in our arguments and our restraint, in our togetherness and in our loneliness. In the midst of all of the difficulties that may be ahead of us, may we hold on to the promise of God's love and salvation made to each of us in Holy Baptism, the assurance that nothing in all creation can separated us from God's love. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.