

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

I'm going to let you in on a little secret of the pastor trade. It has to do with conducting a wedding. It used to be that only pastors and occasionally justices of the peace performed weddings. Now pretty much anyone can officiate, depending on the state. So, this little secret might actually come in handy. Here it is. When you conduct a wedding rehearsal, you start at the end. You practice marching out of the church first. Why? Because you're going to practice marching into the church second. And what every wedding party participant needs to know when they're marching in at the beginning of the service is where to march *to*. If you begin the rehearsal with everyone lined up where they are going to be during the wedding and then practice marching out (what we call the recessional), then the marching in (what we call the processional) will be a piece of cake. So, there it is. A trick of the pastor trade. Use it in good health.

Today we begin a new church year, a month ahead of the secular calendar. If you can't wait for 2020 to be over, today is your lucky day. You may have noticed, though, that every year on the first Sunday of Advent the lectionary gives us ominous readings like the ones we have today, focused on the end times. Why? Could it possibly be for the same reason pastors start wedding rehearsals with the recessional? So that everyone knows where they're going? So they know what to expect? Maybe so. That's kind of how it functions in Mark's Gospel, but more about that in a minute.

First I need to get us oriented so that we know what we're looking at here. This chapter of Mark is known as the little apocalypse. Scholars named it that because they noticed that it belongs to a type of ancient literature known as apocalyptic – the same genre that the book of Revelation belongs to (whose name in Greek is “apocalypsis.”) This chapter of Mark draws heavily on the book of Daniel, the apocalyptic book of the Old Testament. As I mentioned a few weeks back in my sermon on a text from Revelation, the main function of apocalyptic literature is to comfort and encourage people who are facing very difficult times with a message of hope. And the people Mark was writing his Gospel for were facing difficult times. If you think we're polarized right now in our country, and we are, the situation in Mark's time was even more so. It was divided between Jewish Zealots, who wanted to force the Romans out of their land at the point of a sword, and those who did not believe that violence was the way to resist the Roman occupation. Jesus' followers belonged to the latter group. But they could not stop the Zealots from pushing their agenda. The result was what historians call the First Jewish War in which the Romans besieged and then destroyed much of Jerusalem, including the temple, in the year 70. This chapter begins with Jesus and the disciples walking in the temple grounds. When the disciples admire the size of the stones and the buildings, Jesus says that before long “not one stone will be left on top of another. All of this will be thrown down.” “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.” (Mk. 13:12) And so it happened. The message here, Jesus' message for his disciples, and Mark's message for his community, is that the difficult times his hearers will experience and are experiencing right now are not the last word. This not how your story ends, he tells them. God is faithful, and because God is faithful to God's promises, you can be faithful too.

Now that we appreciate what apocalyptic literature does for us and to us, we are able to see that Jesus doesn't just *make* a promise here. He goes on to live and die by that promise.

Because the next thing that happens in Mark is what we now call Holy Week, the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus will trust the Father to see him through the ordeal that he must face. On the cross he will be revealed in his glory. "Truly, this man was God's Son!" the centurion will declare. Though the temple of his body will be destroyed, this will not be the last word, for him, or for those his word touches.

And that is why we confidently bring Veronica Elisabeta to the waters of Holy Baptism this morning. This child, born this summer in the midst of a global pandemic, we bring to the waters of baptism to convey to her the promise that whatever this life has in store for her, she is a precious and beloved child of God, joined here to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like her sister Sylvia before her, and following the ancient practice of the church, she will go fully into the water three times. That's why we have such a big font set up here this morning. It's not something you see often in a Lutheran Church, but it is an option for us. And because Veronica's father grew up in the Greek Orthodox Church where this way of baptizing is still the practice to this day, her parents are enthusiastic about exercising this option. But because we are still in the thick of the pandemic, we're going to administer this baptism a little differently than we did Sylvia's. I'm going to keep my distance from the baptismal party. I will speak the words of the baptism, but her father will be the one immersing her in the font. And also, normally after the baptism we mark the newly baptized with the cross of Christ in oil. We are going to save that part of the rite for when we are able to gather again as a congregation in-person, at which time we'll also present the baptismal candle. But I want you all to know that even though you are physically distanced from Veronica today, you are still a part of this service. There is a place for you to promise your support for her as your new sister in Christ. Please make that promise at the appropriate time. Helen and I will speak the words of promise for ourselves and for you in this room. But you at home, make that promise out loud too in whatever room you find yourself.

The message of the first Sunday of Advent is that the future is in God's hands, and God is faithful to God's promises. The message of Holy Baptism, for Veronica, for you, and for me, is that we are connected to God's future through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We begin our lives of faith at the end, with the promise that our future is secure in God. And because God is faithful to God's promises, we can be faithful to our new identity as children of God, and we can be faithful to our calling to be agents of God's love and forgiveness in a world bent on hatred and revenge. May we rejoice today in God's promises. May we take them to heart. May we live hopefully and faithfully into God's future, even in the midst of difficult times. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and Minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.