

Easter 6, 5.17.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

“Hope for Living”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Wherever you are I am glad you are worshipping with us. The good news that Jesus speaks to us today is that he will not leave his people orphaned. This means Christ Jesus will not abandon us in our isolation, in our suffering, in our distance from one another; rather, Christ comes to us wherever we are. Because Christ lives, we shall live also. This may sound simple, but it is perhaps the most profound message we will ever hear. Jesus’ real presence gives us hope for living each and every day wherever we are.

The words “wherever we are” are another way of expressing the word “reality.” Recently our reality as human beings has become fraught with difficulty. Reality is where we live each and every day, 24/7. Reality is relentless. There is no escaping from reality and its claims upon us. Our relationships with family, friends, co-workers all take place in the real time of reality. Our health, emotions, and spiritual lives all reside in this thing we call reality. We may catch up with one another through cards, letters, email, telephone, and video communication, but all of us know these are not real replacements for actually being together.

We cannot edit reality. We cannot package and polish it. Lord knows we try. The world of advertising tries very hard to give us an edited and appealing version of reality, hoping to induce us to consume more of whatever is being sold. Even churches and televangelists have been editing their messages for years, attempting to give us yet another product to consume. But even that is not the reality of God’s presence.

The place where Jesus promises to come to you is where you are, and however you are. Jesus promises to come to us in the relentless reality of our lives. Online worship, as many churches have been experiencing recently, is a wonderful tool because it connects us in real time to one another. It connects us to a holy reality where we continue to experience God’s presence in our lives. The worship event is a real time event because Christ promises to be with us in the real time of our anxiety, suffering, and joy. The Holy Spirit gathers us into Christ’s body, the church, so that together we can live for others in the relentlessness of their reality.

Of course, we long for a time when we can truly be with one another again in this sacred space.

Living in isolation from one another isn't simply "an inconvenience," it is a hardship because as human beings we need community in order to thrive and achieve our full potential as people. The most genuine expression of the church is the real time experience of word and sacrament.

Living at a distance from one another is not easy. To make matters worse, though we long to be able to go out into public again, because of the current pandemic, going out in public may also feel frightening because there is, as yet, no vaccine or effective treatment for this illness, other than remaining socially distant. Without adequate medical solutions for this pandemic, no amount of optimism, cheerleading, wishful thinking, or denial can alter the fact that we are adrift as a world. This is our reality: it is tough and it is inescapable, sin and death have always been part of reality.

Recently I have read reports and studies of how anxiety and depression are on the rise. For people struggling with dependence issues, reality in a time of pandemic can be very difficult. Isolation is not easy for human beings. We look for ways to remain calm and anxiety free. As human beings we need community to thrive and remain productive in our workplaces and in our families. When we are under stress, the human temptation to escape is always with us.

The good news is that Christ Jesus does not abandon us. Jesus comes to us here and now – in reality – making us into God's children and heirs, making us into a royal priesthood, the church. At every stage of life, the daily grind of uncertainty is hard on everyone, yet Christ Jesus knows where we are. Jesus knows the reality of our suffering. Jesus blesses the stuff of life, the everyday. Jesus became human in order to bless and redeem our humanity and the reality that carries us through our lives. This time of pandemic is an opportunity to see anew that Jesus lives as one of us, and that we are now part of him. Because of Christ, we are holy people, and reality has also been made holy.

The words of today's psalm, Psalm 66, are especially meaningful, "*For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried...you have laid burdens on our backs...we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.*" The Good Shepherd always brings us to a spacious place, a place of grace and blessing. After two months of a lifestyle of isolation, we may feel as if we have been sorely tested; we may feel anxious and tired. Yet each day the risen Christ brings us to the spacious reality of grace.

In the Prayers of Intercession today, our prayer assistant Maddie, describes this time as one of missed opportunities. Maddie's prayer reads, "Loving and caring God, our thoughts at this time of the year turn to milestones like confirmation and graduation, but we know it's more than that, from birthdays and anniversaries to holidays and social gatherings. We have missed opportunities to

celebrate these milestones together.” These words remind us not only is our time is limited, we grieve the loss of missed opportunities of being together.

Yet the reality of God’s grace is also relentless. God’s goodness and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives. The real presence of Christ is with us every single moment of the day. Paul said it much better than I could ever say it in his speech at the Areopagus in Athens: “*The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines created by human hands...indeed he is not far from each of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’.*” If we gain nothing else from our current experience, we are blessed if we remember, “*In God we live and move and have our being.*” God is the source and foundation of all life and reality. “*In him we live and move and have our being.*” Our current sufferings aren’t about what we are missing – that would be missing the point – daily reality is about discovering Christ already present with us.

When I served as a missionary in Japan, I was on the national Executive Council of the Japanese Lutheran Church. This body of the national church assembled twice a year for week-long meetings, which were 9 am to 9 pm and dealt with pressing issues in the life of the church. Discussions were often difficult, yet each day always ended in prayer. I remember one evening the president of the church ended an evening session with prayer and spoke about the stress of living in the modern world, and that Christians were not exempt from this stress. He said God doesn’t remove Jesus’ followers from suffering and stress, passing over us simply because we bear the name “Christian.” No, instead, times of testing become an opportunity for prayer and the discovery of God’s abiding grace. Times of testing become an opportunity to look within oneself to discover that God has never left us. Hope is already present within, and adversity becomes an opportunity to lay our burdens upon Christ. In doing so we realize “*in him we live and move and have our being.*”

It is natural that we grieve the loss of moments and milestones, but please do not miss the grace that these times offer in seeing the reality of God’s constant presence. It is God’s presence that gives meaning to life’s milestones; it is God’s presence that gives meaning and redemption to suffering. It is God’s presence that redeems our very being and brings us into a place of spacious grace. *In him we live and move and have our being.* This is hope for living. The presence of God cannot be edited, airbrushed, packaged and marketed. God’s love, mercy and forgiveness are with you today, right now – in this moment that is reality. This moment is God’s space of grace. It is a powerful place of hope - hope for living – each and every day. Amen.