

Pentecost 23, 11.8.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

“Time is running out”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.* Amen. Good morning. Thank you for joining us in-person and online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.

The pandemic has changed many things in our lives. Our work life, school life, family life, community and national life have all been remarkably changed by the pandemic. Though I am very happy to see members of St. Mark’s in attendance today, our still mostly empty church is a sign of how changed our normal daily patterns still are. This pandemic is serious. People continue to die each day, and over 236,000 people have perished from this disease in this country alone. Most of us have never had such massive and ongoing disruption in our lives, and it is probably safe to say that most of us wish we could wave a magic wand and just make the pandemic go away.

Yet as I think about life during a pandemic, it has become clear to me that the cycle of human life also continues. The life cycle of birth and death goes on. A few weeks ago, we welcomed the birth of a new baby to the English family, and today in the Prayers of Intercession we mourn and also give thanks for the life of Becky Hallman who died early last Thursday morning. The cycle of human life continues. Human life is precious and it is also finite, as births and deaths show us.

As we long for familiar patterns and wonder what the “new normal” will be, it has also become clear to me that what *is* “normal” is that human life has always about responding to challenge. Human life is about crises, emergencies, and challenges. Human mortality and frailty are the “normal” condition of human life. Christian hope exists precisely in the center of human frailty, suffering and death, because that is where Jesus Christ is. Christ chose to become human so that we would not live, suffer and die without strength and the hope of his resurrection.

Yet the lifestyles we usually call “normal” are patterns of life that actually keep us at a safe distance from having to think too much about the ultimate and final concerns of our lives. Daily, in our consumer culture, we are tempted to believe that we will never die. Daily, in our consumer culture, we attempt to buy our way into immortality. We behave as if our limited time on this planet was unlimited. We all do it. We ignore the ticking clock by buying more, eating more, traveling more, with a kind of restlessness that ignores the ultimate reality of our very limited human lifetimes. Yet our lifetimes *are limited* and they end all too quickly - and there isn’t a lot that we can do to change this very naked and harsh fact.

Our readings today all remind us that “time is running out.” Are we prepared for the Day of the Lord? Are we prepared to stand before Christ who will, as we confess, “come to judge the living and the dead”? The prophet Amos did not sugarcoat his message: *“Is not the day of the Lord darkness... with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”*

Amos reminds us that the coming Day of the Lord will be a reckoning that no amount of worship or offerings will be able to save us from, unless we also wade into God’s waters of justice and righteousness. In others words, our religious life must also bear the good works of faith. We must be concerned with the care of “the least of these” whom Jesus called as his family: the poor, the hungry, the sick, the stranger, the imprisoned. Our worship life and our offerings of our selves, our time and our possessions, should be the ways that we participate in God’s waters of justice and righteousness.

As I think about “time running out” and participating in Amos’ vision of God’s justice and righteousness, I remember a faithful response to a time of crisis. In 1923, Tokyo was struck by a devastating earthquake now named the “Great Kanto Earthquake.” The fire that followed the earthquake destroyed homes and businesses on a vast scale. After the earthquake many people were displaced and homeless. Senior citizens were left without homes and families, and many children were orphaned, because their families had perished in the earthquake and fires. 1923 was a time long before modern social welfare and social security in Japan. People were in need, and a Lutheran Pastor named Denki Honda put his faith into direct action to help the weakest and most vulnerable. Pastor Honda helped found Tokyo Home for the Aged, and Bethany Home for Mothers and Children. Both of these institutions were among the first of their kind in Japan and still exist today. In 1923 Pastor Honda waded into the waters of God’s justice and righteousness by responding to the needs of others. Pastor Honda used his time to show that it is normal for God to be present in human suffering.

Today’s readings remind us that as we wait for Christ’s coming, we are to wisely use our time and lives to we prepare for the coming kingdom of God. We are to live courageously, waiting for Christ and working for justice and righteousness, because God will judge us by our faith and by our works of faith.

What has become very clear to me during this pandemic is that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers us something that the world will never offer. The gospel tells us that Christ Jesus chose to be with us in our suffering, challenges and even in our dying. This is what the justice and righteousness of God looks like. In Christ we are certain that we have someone who will be with us in the midst of suffering and death.

So if I have learned anything in these eight months of pandemic, “normal” for God is to be with humanity in all our daily crises, challenges, and even in our dying. The pandemic offers us an opportunity to see - if we are willing to look - that God is with us *precisely in and because of* our human frailty and suffering.

In the autumn of 1939, after the Second World War had begun in Europe, theologian and Christian writer, C. S. Lewis gave a sermon at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin at Oxford University. In that sermon, C. S. Lewis spoke about war, and what he said remains very applicable to our current pandemic situation. Lewis said, “Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to live under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself... We are mistaken when we compare war with “normal” life. Life has never been normal. Even those periods, which we think most tranquil... turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of crises, alarms, difficulties, emergencies.”

“Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice.” In Pastor Honda’s era, it was an earthquake, in Lewis’ era it was war, and in our present time it is a pandemic, but each of these crises are moments to remember that it is normal for God to be with us in our frailty and weakness, and even as our time is running out, in our dying.

In the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, Jesus gave a depiction of the normal life of faith. According to Jesus the normal life of faith is about always being prepared for the coming of God’s kingdom. For Jesus “normal” means using our time wisely to focus upon faith and the justice and righteousness of God’s kingdom, because as that parable makes clear, “time is running out.”

There *will come* a point of no return in each of our lives when we will no longer have the freedom or the opportunity to prepare, or to bear the good works of faith. For Amos, Paul and Jesus – a “normal” life is about living with courage and hope expecting that God is always close at hand in the middle of crises and challenges, in earthquakes, war, and even in a time of pandemic.

Today marks eight months since we last freely gathered for in-person for worship. We have been living this kind of church life for eight months, and have continued to feed the hungry and collect

food for those in need. We have continued to welcome the stranger in our midst; we have continued to pray for one another. We have remembered that prayer, service, and compassion are some of the ways we wade into God's waters of justice and righteousness in our lives. In Holy Baptism, God's waters have already flowed over us with justice and righteousness, so that freed from sin and death we might live freely as signs of God's love for others.

For Christians, "normal" means knowing we have been freed from sin and death so that we can live with courage and hope for others each day. Whether it was an earthquake in Japan, or the Second World War in Great Britain, or whether it is a global pandemic today, we remember that the "new normal" means that Christ Jesus is always at the center of our lives making all things new. The presence of Christ is the new normal that gives peace and courage at the center of our lives. Even as our time is running out – Christ is always at the center pulling us with irresistible gravity and grace into God's kingdom. Time is running out, but this is a great blessing, because it means that Christ and grace are always near to us.

In today's temple talk, Marc Ginns shared about how a church can set the direction to our lifetimes. Over a lifetime, Christ walks with us in prayer, service and compassion to others. Over a lifetime, Christ pulls us with gravity and grace into his justice and love.

Time is running out, and Christ needs your hands. Christ needs your support. I call on you to wade into the waters of God's justice and righteousness again, and respond to the need around you. Believe as if everything depended upon God, and work as if everything depended upon you.

Time is running out in 2020, and in our lives if we are honest. St. Mark's still needs you, your time and your gifts. Please support St. Mark's year-end Appeal, and please make a pledge for 2021.

Over a lifetime, Jesus calls us to wade into the waters of God's justice and righteousness. Over a lifetime Jesus pulls us again and again, with gravity and grace, into his love. Yes, time is running out, but this is normal. Time is always running out, and Christ Jesus is with us.

Time is running out. Christ needs you. How will you respond? Amen.