

Message in the age of Corona Virus

Mark 12:13-17

March 15, 2020

God's grace and peace and courage be yours in these trying times!

I am here in the sanctuary this Sunday morning preaching in an almost empty room, but trusting that when you hear these words that you will be encouraged and blessed to be a blessing as we walk through the days ahead.

When terrorists attacked the twin towers on a Tuesday morning in September 2001 and killed 3,000 people, it felt like the earth was shifting under our feet. I let go of the sermon I was going to preach that next Sunday and started fresh with what I believed people needed to hear. I will do something similar today. I will reflect on a portion of the gospel text for the day, but I will also offer you some general words of encouragement.

First of all, please remember that even though we are not at church, we are still *the* church. The church is the body of Christ on a mission to bless the world. We happen to meet Sunday morning for worship as a corporate body to hear the Word and to receive the Sacraments. Sometimes we say we are going to church. We really are going to a building. The church, the people of God, meets here.

So church hasn't been cancelled this morning- *our corporate worship* has been cancelled. Church goes on, because we the body of Christ are the church- and we will continue to be the church out and about in the world as the hands and feet and voice of Christ. We will be church to each other and to our neighbors in need. We just won't be worshipping together for a season. You know, sometimes we give up things for Lent. Maybe we can view this time as fasting from being together, and it will make it all the richer when we come together again.

So we will continue to be the church during these challenging times. As our church-wide bishop, Elizabeth Eaton says, This is a time of disruption. But

it's also a time to live and act as God's faithful people. So how do we stay connected during this time? And how do we as faithful people care for our neighbor?

You remember that when someone asked Jesus what the most important commandment was, he said, Love God with everything you have- your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. So these challenging days will be a great opportunity to love and serve our neighbor in need. Dez, our youth ministry coordinator, is already at work figuring out how we as the church can help those in our community who might be struggling during this pandemic. There will be folks in isolation who will need groceries or medicine or a cheerful voice on the telephone. Dez will be organizing a team of youth and adults who will reach out to be a blessing. Some of that will be dropping something off at a doorstep. Some of it will be reaching out by phone or Skype or Zoom or Facetime. And youth, you are out of school right now, so you've got time on your hands to be a blessing! We'll carry this out keeping safety in mind, of course.

Maybe we can organize a common prayer time when we know we are praying for each other and for the world. At this point, we are planning to live stream a worship service starting next Sunday, March 22nd. I will be in the sanctuary with a small team of folks, maintaining social distance, and we will broadcast a worship service that you can be part of. We'll even send out a bulletin ahead of time, you can pick up a hymnbook during the week, or we'll deliver one to you, or we'll put everything on the screen and you'll be able to see the monitors on your home screen, and you can give God your praise from your own home. Looks like we'll be fasting from communion for a while, but it will be all the richer an experience when we gather together again.

Our own Martin Luther had his own version of the corona virus to deal with, only it was even worse- The bubonic plague came to his hometown of Wittenberg in 1527. This was just ten years after he posted his 95 theses on the church door. He was still under death threats from the Roman Catholic

Church. Because of the plague, the university where he was a professor was closed- that should sound familiar. Luther was urged to leave by his greatest supporter, the prince who ruled over the town. His pastors asked him to give them advice as to whether to remain or to flee. So he wrote and published a pamphlet called, “Whether one may flee a deadly plague.”

Here is a part of what he said- “You ought to think this way- Very well, by God’s decree, the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal (meaning waste or refuse). Therefore, I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. (He starts with prayer, and then he gets very practical) Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. (Let me read that again). If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person, but will go freely.”

Luther would agree about washing your hands, and staying away from crowds, so that he would not help cause someone’s death. But he also stayed in Wittenberg and helped in the crisis. In fact, he and Katie took the sick into their home. This crisis will give us a chance to bless our neighbors.

Let me say one more thing about the role of the state in all this. Our text from Mark addresses this this morning. A group of religious leaders and some civil authorities from Herod’s court come to Jesus in our gospel today in order to trap him. He is in Jerusalem the last week of his life. They ask him this question- “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?” In other words, what role should we have in supporting those who rule over us?

They thought they had him trapped. If he said, Yes, pay your taxes to the empire, he would lose the support of the poor people who hated the Roman

occupiers. And if he said don't pay, the Romans would arrest him as a subversive. They thought they had him trapped.

St. Mark continues- But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

By the way, a Pharisee should not have had this coin in his pocket, because it bore the image of Tiberius Caesar, and the coin called him divine. That was a violation of the commandment not to make any graven images. This is why Jesus calls them hypocrites. But Jesus gives this answer- Give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and give to God the things that belong to God. Yes, Jesus acknowledges that the Jewish people were under duress when it came to paying taxes to the Roman occupiers. But then Jesus says, give to God the things that are God's. And consider this- if the coin bears the image of the emperor, *we bear the image of God*. If it comes down to whom we obey in a conflict between the state and God, we side with our allegiance to God. Our primary loyalty belongs to God. With his answer, he doesn't tell us what we ought to do. He tells us how we ought to think about these decisions.

Maybe this helps us in the age of corona virus to see the place of the state. There are people skeptical of this crisis, wondering if this whole thing is just political. It shows how cynical some folks have become about government, and about experts, and about science. Certainly at times Christians have had to stand up against an unjust state. But in the best sense, God has given us government to keep order and to work for the common good. We need to pray for our leaders during these difficult days, whether they are local mayors and city leaders, county leaders, the governor, our president and congress. And let's be praying for our health care professionals who lay their lives on the line.

I close by reading the psalm that was the basis for Martin Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, Psalm 46-

1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

7 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

10 'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'

11 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Selah

Let us pray. (prayer during a time of corona virus)