

“Surviving the Coronavirus”

Liturgical Date: Preached on Lent 4A, but different readings and focus due to Coronavirus pandemic

Primary Texts: 2 Timothy 1:3-14; St. Luke 13:1-5

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. The primary texts for today, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, are the Epistle from 2 Timothy 1 and Gospel from St. Luke 13. The title of the sermon, reflecting the global pandemic that has descended upon our fallen world, is “Surviving the Coronavirus.”

Today’s sermon will be somewhat different than you normally hear. Especially if you are tuning in by web cast or recording and are not a member of Christ the King you should understand that in most Lutheran churches sermons are generally not focused on current events. We usually expound more on a particular passage of Scripture. In fact, my belief is that as a general rule we should avoid ripping our sermon topics from the headlines of the day because when we gather as God’s people it is in a Sanctuary. It is a respite from the non-stop coverage and pontificating of “talking heads” on the latest “news de jour”.

That being said, there are certain events that are so wide in their scope and that impact so many people that it is almost impossible to not talk about them. And things of that scope and magnitude often cause disruption, fear, and uncertainty in many people. And in these cases what we pastors need to do is to dig into the Bible, the very Word of God, for direction and helpful things that we can share with our flock in addressing the topic. For example, after 9/11 I remember that my local congregation had a special service as people were shocked, fearful, and uncertain of what may come. The pastor

took us to the Word in providing peace, hope, comfort and direction. And if you think about it, this spread of the virus known by several names (I will simply use “Coronavirus” here today) has disrupted our normal routines with closures and restrictions more than anything since September 2001. I am not saying this is the same thing (as that was brought about by the evil actions of people and this is a virus) or may it have as long of a lasting impact. But we are in the midst of this pandemic and we will see what happens as events have been unfolding and rapidly changing.

I don’t have to go into all the details chronicling recent events, because I sure you have been following the news. And in terms of practical advice, I would urge you to limit the amount of hours you spend watching the news because when you only digest that for hours on end it can lead to fear and trepidation. Yes, stay informed and updated-but keep it to a level of moderation in terms of learning what you need to know. Pay attention for direct to actual statements and documents that sources like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the President and his Task force, the governor and local officials are putting out. If you are concerned about the news putting a “spin” on it, go read the document or view the statement yourself as a primary source.

Around the world (as of Saturday morning 3/21) about 275,000 people have tested positive for the Coronavirus and 11,300 have died, with the epicenters being China and Italy. In the U.S. there are over 15,000 confirmed cases and 200 deaths. In Georgia, (as of 7 PM 3/21) we have 555 confirmed cases and 20 deaths. Let’s consider for a moment the worst case scenario. If every single American contracted this virus (over 300 million people), and the death rate is 2-4% for the virus. The most at risk populations are those over 65 and those with medical conditions affecting

the heart, lungs, and immune system where the death rate is significantly higher. So even if everyone got, you would very likely survive. In no way am I saying that this virus is not serious-many have died and barring a return of Jesus in the near future-more will die. But I do pray that this helps puts it in perspective. At least at this point, this is not the “black death” plague of the Middle Ages where in areas where it hit death rates were about 60% and almost 100% in compromised populations. Or in our own American history, when Europeans arrived to the Americas in some regions 80-90% of the American Indians died from diseases that their bodies had no immunity to. The 2009 Swine flu pandemic infected over a billion people and by some estimated killed over 500,000.

So the best thing to prevent a virus from spreading is what we have been, and are always told: wash your hands thoroughly, don't go around sick people, stay away from others if you are sick, avoid excessive touching especially in times when a sickness is present. If we look for good in this, one thing is that many more people are actually be more cleanly and washing their hands-if you can find hand sanitizer it is worth its weight in gold. I saw one meme on Facebook of a picture of a case of hand sanitizer and it said, “will trade for truck or boat, no low-bidders.”

As I noted earlier, the best thing to do in times of uncertainly-including pestilence, and really anytime, is to find solace and direction from the very Word of God. When this virus began spreading around the country and the schools began closing, the first Bible verse that was brought to my mind was 1Timothy 1:7, “*For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.*” We are to be people driven by faith, not fear. And as I went back and read the context of that verse I found

it to be very helpful in providing a direction for a time like this. And this is what I have chosen as our Epistle reading and primary sermon text for today.

The words penned here are not exactly in the same context that we have today in dealing with a pandemic, pestilence as we have traditionally called in from our English translations of the Bible. Paul is writing a letter to his protégé Timothy from prison. The first time he was jailed by the Romans he was essentially under house arrest, but this time he is in a cell- believed to have only a small 18 inch opening at the top as his only contact to the outside world. He is awaiting his execution, St. Paul would become a martyr for the faith. In effect, 2 Timothy is his “last will and testament” and he knows these may be the last words he writes.

So while he is in prison, not sick from a virus there are some similar emotions that could certainly be in play. Most people would be scared in dank and tiny cell, knowing that they would likely never make it out alive. As many have become in the response to the Coronavirus, he is isolated. In verse 4 he writes to Timothy, “*Greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears*”. Many people right now are afraid of getting sick, even dying, or actually are or are fearful of being separated from their loved ones. And the aspect of persecution was not limited to Paul, as the Coronavirus is not limited to one person or region. Other Christians were being persecuted and martyred for the faith. Believers were aware that the dreaded knock of Empire could come to their door to take them or loved ones away.

But how is the Apostle Paul responding to his situation? With faith, not fear. When you read through the New Testament it is amazing how much opposition, hardship, and persecution that St. Paul faced for faithfully preaching the Gospel, what is even more amazing-and inspiring-is his

response to it. How can we survive the Coronavirus? We, as followers of Christ, can learn much how to deal with our current context here.

I taught about prayer in the Sunday School class this morning. We should always pray and God specifically tells us to call on Him in the day of trouble (Psalm 50:15). In verse 3 Paul tells us that he is praying without ceasing, day and night-remembering Timothy. Prayer is how we speak to God and cannot be neglected.

In verse 7 the spirit of fear is contrasted with a spirit of power, love, and sound mind. This is wrought by the work of God the Holy Spirit. As verse 14 proclaims the Holy Ghost dwells in us. Think on that for a moment. God Himself is literally with us. If God is for us, with us, then nothing can ultimately defeat us-not even fear and death. The power of God is over everything, and working in and through us. In this power we love Him and serve Him following what Jesus says in Matthew 22 is what all of the law and prophets hang on, two things: love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, and mind and love thy neighbor as thyself. It is in God that we have this love, because God Himself is love (1 John 4:8). God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son for it (John 3:16). In faith, we know that God loves us and desires the best for His children, even though we don't always understand why certain things are happening.

The Greek word *sophronismos* literally means "saving the mind" and is translated in our King James text as "sound mind". Other English translations have it as: discipline, self-control, wise discretion, sobriety, sound judgment, even prudence. So the Holy Spirit, the opposite of the spirit of fear produces a sound mind, the ability to use the wisdom that comes from God to make wise decisions. We are to trust God, but not tempt Him as Jesus refused to throw Himself off the temple when satan urged him

to do so. And in exercising this “sound mind” in the power of the Holy Spirit we express the love of God, which includes loving our neighbor.

This past week the elders and church leadership discussed what we should do in light of the current situation in terms of our in-person congregational gatherings. The buzzword of the day is “social distancing” and that is not what we in the church usually encourage. It was not an easy decision, and not all agreed on the best course of action. But ultimately the council vote was to move to the format we have now until the end of March, at which point the situation will need to be re-evaluated. Part of the reason we would not meet in person is loving our neighbor in reducing the risk of spreading the virus to others, in particular our elderly and immune system compromised people.

We also had the aspect of our government, in particular the guidelines released by President Trump’s Task Force on the Coronavirus-including discouraging the gathering of more than 10 people. Now these don’t have the force of law and our governor in Georgia has discouraged churches from meeting, but not required it. And we are dealing with a situation where our governments are assuming a more active role in restricting activities. As Christians Romans 13 makes it clear we must submit to the governing authorities because they are God appointed. Jesus even said to pay taxes to Rome. The only exception for a Christian to rightfully disobey the government is if they are requiring of something that would lead to sin, as outlined in Acts 5.

I would encourage you during this time to be a good citizen. Pray for our leaders. In the midst of Paul writing this from a Roman prison cell, at the very beginning of the next chapter he urges prayer for the very leaders that put him there. It doesn’t really matter if you voted for the people

making decisions or not. They are the leaders we have and we should submit to those authorities unless it would cause us to sin. We don't have to agree with everything the government does or says, but we are to be law-abiding citizens. Once again, no one in our area has said churches cannot meet in person-but the guidelines do warrant our serious consideration. As I stated earlier this situation is not the same as 9/11 but I can't think of anything since that has caused such a disruption of our daily lives, closures, fears, and expansion of governmental power. Many of us remember the spirit of unity and patriotism and the lack of partisanship in those days following the terrorist attacks. I believe that we need more of this today.

St. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speaks in our Epistle text of being a prisoner, afflictions, and suffering. The "end of the line" certainly is on the horizon for him. But he is not dismayed. His concern here is actually directed toward Timothy, rather than himself. How is this possible? Because he has the Holy Spirit and not the spirit of fear. In verse 9 he tells us that he will overcome what is facing him because God saved him and us. God has him and by grace he is saved, not of works. God has had a plan since before the world began. He advises Timothy in verse 13 to, *"Hold fast the form of sound word, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."*

I do want to touch on our Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 13 as in these 5 verses we can glean much insight into our situation we face today. Every time a disaster strikes there are those Christians who see this as a sign of Jesus' imminent return or a sign of God punishing some certain sin. In a way they have point in that Jesus could return at any time, but as the Scripture cautions us we must be prepared at all times but cannot say when that will be. They are correct that every pestilence and calamity is a result of

sin. We live in a fallen world that is violent, both through the wicked actions of people and the violent fury of the natural world. If we had not sinned, there would be none of those things. However, when anyone claims to know for sure that a particular thing is a direct judgment of God for a particular sin our discernment antennas need to go up.

In the Gospel text, Jesus addresses this very issue. People asked Jesus about two terrible things that had happened recently that everyone knew about: some Galileans were ordered killed by Pilate while they made holy sacrifices to God and a tower in Siloam fell, killing 18 people. People wondered what these people had done to bring this judgment upon them. Jesus' response to the bringing up of both cases is exactly the same. In neither case did this happen to them because they were worse sinners. They of course were sinners, but He is making the point that all are sinners. He speaks these words in verses 3 and 5, "*Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall likewise perish.*"

We do need to repent of our sins. Not just in Lent or during a time of distress, but all the time. And in these days when people have questions and fears and are thinking about death on a daily basis, we need to sound the clarion call of repentance. And in this call for repentance, we share that forgiveness and life is only found in Jesus, by grace through faith. In your interactions with others-which maybe at more of a distance now, take this as an opportunity to share the hope that lies within you. Point others away from fear and death and to the Gospel of Christ, the power of God.

How will we survive the Coronavirus? It is kind of a running joke I have in my Bible studies, but I say that if I ask a question there is a good chance the answer is... Jesus. And He is how we survive and overcome the Coronavirus or any other challenge. We may have some inconveniences

with important events being canceled or modified. We may even suffer if our economic resources dry up. We may even have ourselves or a loved one afflicted with this virus. It seems like we are giving up a lot. One person on Facebook tried to find some humor in it by saying, *“To be honest Lord, I wasn’t planning on giving up this much for Lent!”* But what we may lose, even if it is our very earthly life, pales in comparison to what we gain in Jesus. What does the Lord speak through St. Paul in verse 10? *“But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.”* Jesus has come, died, rose again, and thus brings eternal salvation to all believers. No virus, nor anything else can change that.

So wash your hands, use common sense in limiting your interactions with others. But above all stay strong by feeding your faith during this time, even as we are not having our regular worship gatherings. I keep saying hear from God everyday by reading your Bible and talk to God everyday in prayer. And I mean it. Love God above all else and love your neighbor as yourself. Faith over fear. Life over death. Jesus is king over everything.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.