

Pentecost 26C + November 13, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 21:5-19
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

Every Tuesday a group of Beloit area ELCA pastors gets together for text study. When I first started going to this, I have to admit it was little more than a glorified gossip session. I learned some things about Beloit but sometimes there was TMI. I think that's because several of the regulars were on the verge of retirement and maybe they were tired of studying the texts.

I'm happy to say we've had some turnover and now have returned to actually looking at the texts for the Sundays coming up. This month we're meeting here. When we sat down the morning of Election Day to look at this week's Gospel reading, the new interim pastor at Jefferson Prairie in Clinton, Mark Peterson, said right away, "I'm glad I'm not preaching this Sunday!"

At first glance it's easy to see why. Here we are, faced with the totally unexpected outcome of the possibly most divisive election ever, and before us is this apocalyptic imagery. What are we to do with it? "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." We heard talk about apocalypse—the end of the world—on both sides, if the other was elected. One online magazine was rating news developments in the weeks leading up to the election according to horsemen of the apocalypse from one to four.

There were voters truly excited about one candidate or the other, but mostly people were dispirited by and disillusioned with both. This could be because people recognized on some level that these candidates brought out the worst in the American electorate. Bill Barth's editorial last weekend in the Beloit Daily News captured it well: "Modern politics has become dark and divisive—the parties slicing and dicing the electorate, dog-whistling the baser instincts,

deliberately seeking to turn neighbor against neighbor.”

And so there is an outcome, but no resolution. Either way a lot of people’s hopes were going to be crushed. This is a familiar feeling. We had it after last week’s Packer game, when the Packers sparked a comeback after three dismal quarters but then Ha-Ha Clinton-Dix failed to make that sack to stop the Colts’ drive with three minutes to go in the fourth quarter—if Rodgers had only gotten the ball back I KNOW we would have scored the winning touchdown. Once again, hopes were crushed.

How often elsewhere in life has our hope been crushed? Investments that went bust. A company on which you bet your life, only to have it close. A spouse who disappointed you, or maybe you disappointed them, but the end result is still divorce. Untimely deaths that leave us wondering how we will carry on. A decline in membership that leaves us wondering what lies ahead. By the way, the Council meets tomorrow night to set our budget for next year based on pledges we’ve received, so if you haven’t yet made yours, please do that today.

The temptation is to give up on hope. It’s so easy to give in to this. For our country: “I just don’t care anymore.” For Packer fans: “Forget this season. Just get rid of McCarthy.” For those who have lost loved ones: “God, you let me down.” And all the people who have left this congregation. Apparently their hopes, too, were disappointed.

But there is something wrong with this picture, because all these are not expressions of hope—of Christian hope. Paul tells us in Romans 5 that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” These were not hopes. They were wishes. People wished for a certain outcome. Wishes describe a personal preference. Hope, on the other hand, is our utter confidence in God and

God's promises, a confidence made possible by faith. Writes the modern American poet and monk Thomas Merton, "My hope is in what the eye has never seen. Therefore, let me not trust in visible rewards. My hope is in what the heart of man cannot feel. Therefore let me not trust in the feelings of my heart. My hope is in what the hand of man has never touched. Do not let me trust what I can grasp between my fingers."

God is our hope because God is faithful to us in all circumstances of life, guiding us through dangers, toils, and snares and sustaining us even in the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus Christ is our hope because he is always ready to receive us into his arms with words of love and mercy, lightening our load by taking our burdens upon himself, in his victory over death freeing us from the fear of death. "No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging," we will sing in a few minutes. "Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" Our hymns always have wonderful words of hope. This reminds me of one person who wrote on their yellow sheet about why they love Atonement Lutheran Church: "It makes me happy because of the music."

So we place our hope in the living God, that which we cannot see, touch, or even feel, because feelings, emotions, are transitory and can't be trusted. We no longer fear death, but this is not the way of the world. Therefore we can expect at some point in our live to be the subject of suspicion, condemnation or even persecution. Here is how it works: The rulers of this world, political, social, or religious, seek to control people through the threat of death. But what happens if people no longer fear death? If Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and if death has no power over those who believe in him, and they have no fear of death, what happens to our control over one another? If people no longer fear death, because even though you may kill them, you cannot destroy them, what power do you have left? We can, of course, extend this to

all the ways people try to destroy one another in addition to physically killing them, like destroying their reputation, passing judgment on them, excluding them, and so on.

But these threats of death have no power over us, even as we struggle with doubt and unbelief as all human beings do. Jesus' death and resurrection makes it possible for us to live beyond the power of fear, and thus we live in freedom from the controlling powers of this world that seek to control us through fear of death.

Here in today's reading, Jesus makes clear that Christians are called not only to believe, but to act. In times of tribulation or persecution, Jesus tells us: "This will give you an opportunity to testify." What opportunities can you find? What words and actions can you bring that will communicate to others that you live in freedom from the fear of death? There is so much negativity now, following the election. People are afraid. Instead of joining in, let us use this opportunity to testify to the faithfulness of God in all things. To the hope that us ours in the eternal life that is ours. To God's saving power in Jesus' victory of life over death. To God's amazing grace in the form of a risen Savior, who has taken all our sin upon himself and who walks with us in all our sufferings, reminding us at every step of God's infinite love and forgiveness. The first stanza of our closing hymn today will call us to this proclamation, using a beautiful image from the Lord's Prayer:

Your kingdom come, O Father, to earth's remotest shore.
Your holy fire enkindle and let it flame the more.
Your servants sent to labor where living harvests grow,
That all, your truth receiving, your saving grace may know.

And what is the outcome of our testimony, in which we proclaim the reality of the living Christ even in the midst of tribulation? "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Or a better translation, "you will gain your lives." This is the abundant life to which our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, calls us. The banners on the front of our church say it all: Abundant life. AMEN.