

“Our Light and Our Life”

“... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”

“Is there any word of hope you can give to my generation?”

One of the most surprising aspects of wearing a mask in public is the opportunity it has given me to engage in the community. Many of the masks I wear have a small cross sewn into them (the persons who made them for me know that I am a pastor!). That cross has been the spark of many conversations; one man in the bank asked if I had a favorite Bible verse, and a few people in Shoppers Drug Mart have given me a thumbs up or a quiet “amen.” But the most notable conversation happened early last week at Zehrs, where a young woman noticed my mask and asked if I was a Christian. That began an extended conversation in which she asked many questions about our faith and especially about baptism (she was especially interested when I told her that I’m a Lutheran pastor and that baptism is very central to our teachings). After a very pleasant exchange, she asked a question that had obviously been on her heart for some time: *“Is there any word of hope you can give to my generation?”* She was obviously struggling with believing in the truth of the Gospel and the goodness of God’s creation in a time when the world is in crisis due to the pandemic as well as violence and unrest in cities near and far. It is a time of great anxiety for young people who are returning to schools and universities, who are entering the job market during an economic downturn, and who are looking to a future that is increasingly uncertain and ominous. Her question to me is a question for the church that is called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ: what word of hope can we offer as the people of God to this generation that is facing new and unexpected challenges?

The answer I gave her is that which has always been at the heart of the Church’s proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that God is with us always, that God’s love is steadfast and certain, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is the word that the Church has proclaimed throughout its history in circumstances that were as challenging as those we are facing today, times of uncertainty and unrest in which the forces of darkness appeared to be gaining the upper hand. The Gospel message that can offer hope to this young woman’s generation is the message that we are called to share in these difficult times: in the words of our Call to Worship this morning, *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth should change, though the coronavirus has its way. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”*

The Gospel message that is proclaimed to us in Holy Scripture was originally written to people who were facing difficult challenges in their lives. The entire New Testament was written while the people of God were living under Roman occupation, which at times could be unspeakable cruel (it was the Romans who invented crucifixion both as a means of capital punishment and as a warning

to vanquished people not to challenge Roman rule). Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ was a difficult task that could lead to suffering and persecution for those who dared to preach this message; Jesus himself warned his disciples of what might face them when they were sent forth as messengers of the Word:

- “But before this all occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” – Luke 21:12-19.

The apostolic ministry of St. Paul was one in which he experienced many of these challenges of which Jesus had warned his followers; he was called to be an “apostle to the Gentiles,” to bring the Gospel messages to the far reaches of the known world. Paul was often greeted with hostility when he entered a community and wrote many of his letters from prison. While it is not reported in the New Testament, he is remembered as a martyr for the faith, one who gave his life for the sake of his witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Paul’s letters are all written by a person who faced many hardships and much suffering to persons and communities who were also experiencing similar hardships and suffering. While the apostle never seeks to deny or diminish the reality of these challenges, his message is one of hope for people of his time and all times who are living in times of darkness, who may be wondering where God is amid such suffering, and how they are to live as faithful Christians when being a Christian was difficult. Paul’s letters are written not to people who may wonder what it might be like to live under persecution but who are experiencing such persecution in their daily lives yet live in trust and hope that *“suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* (Romans 5:3-5).

Of the thirteen letters of Paul that are in the New Testament, the letter to the Romans is considered his masterpiece; for Martin Luther, *“the epistle is in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest form.”* It was written by Paul as an introduction in advance of his planned visit to the capital of the empire where several Christian congregations had been established. Unlike his more personal letters addressed to people and communities with which he is familiar, in Romans Paul lays out his apostolic teachings so that the community in Rome might be familiar with what he will proclaim among them when he is able to travel to Rome (a trip that according to the Acts of the Apostle happened when Paul had been arrested and demanded a trial before the emperor that was his right as a Roman citizen). Paul looks forward to his visit with the Christians in Rome *“so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”* (Romans 1:11-12). It was in Romans that Luther heard the words that changed his life and the course of the church

that bears his name: “*For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’*” (1:17).

- “At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates … Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.” – Preface to Latin Writings, 1545.

Paul’s message in today’s second lesson serves as both an instruction for Christians on how they are to live as God’s people in their daily lives and how the message they share will bring light and life to a world dwelling darkness and the shadow of death. He reminds the many Jewish members of the Roman church that the purpose of the Torah as that Israel might be God’s light to the world, and that the fulfillment of the Law is when God’s people “*love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law*” (13:8). People who “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (Leviticus 19:18) will fulfill the teachings of God because through them God’s way of life can be seen. Since love seeks the highest good of the neighbor, it will certainly do no wrong to them. Paul’s words echo the teaching of Jesus, who proclaimed that the greatest commands are to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind … and a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*” (Matthew 22:37-40).

- “To understand love as the basic requirement for the Christian who lives under the grace of Christ is to understand such Christian life as the fulfillment of the law God gave to Israel. Love is thus to be the rule of the Christian life. In the New Testament, love centers not on emotions but on actions. To love someone is to actively promote that person’s good. Love acts for the good of another.” – Paul Achtemeier.

Jesus’ commandment that his disciples love one another was an important part of their witness to the Gospel: “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (John 13:35). That Gospel the disciples are to make known through their love for one another is rooted in the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ, that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (Romans 6:5). With the resurrection of Jesus God’s new age has dawned, but that full day has yet to come (“*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.*” – 1 Corinthians 15:20). Christians therefore live in the interval between the early signs of dawn and the sunrise itself, and their behavior must be appropriate for the day, not the night; for the coming of the new dawn, not the darkness of the past that is fading away. Those who are called to proclaim the good news that we are “*given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*” (1 Peter 1:3) must know “*what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.*” (13:11). Paul uses *Kairos*, which refers to a special moment rather than chronological time

(*chronos*); it is a word that offer refers to God's time, the time of the fulfillment of God's promises ("See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" – 2 Corinthians 6:2). Paul's announcement that this time is "*the moment for you to wake from sleep*" resonates with the early Christian sense of new creation, new life bursting through the wintry crust of the old world. It is a time to "wake up" in expectant hope, for the time of salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. It is rooted in the conviction that Christ will return, that God will in fact one day fulfill the promise of restoration and recreation in the resurrection of Christ. Christians, therefore, in Paul's view, are creatures of the future, not the past. To it they are to look, and by it they are to act.

- "Liberated from the burdens of a sinful past, the Christian strides with confident step into a future which brings ever closer the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan for his creation."
– Achtemeier.

As we look toward to coming dawn in which "*the night is far gone [and] the day is near*," Paul calls upon his readers to "*lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light*" (13:12), using the metaphor of military armor that was a common sight throughout the empire to identify qualities of the Christian life with which believers are to clothe themselves ("*But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.*" – 1 Thessalonians 5:8). The best protection against the powers of the present darkness is to "*put on the Lord Jesus Christ*" with whom we are clothed in baptism ("*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*" – Galatians 3:27). Testifying to the light of Christ that is dawning in our midst, dispelling the darkness of the present age, requires God's people to put aside ways of life in which they dwelled while in the darkness: "*let us live honorably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, and in quarrelling and jealousy*" (13:13) so that they might fulfill Jesus' command to "*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:16).

- "Paul is urging them, as a regular spiritual discipline, to invoke the presence and power of Jesus as Lord of all things to be their defense against all evil, not least the evil toward which they might be lured by their own 'flesh.'" – N.T. Wright.

The call for the people of God to "*put on the Lord Jesus Christ*" reminds us that in Holy Baptism we are reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ. We are clothed in Christ, both to remind us of who we are and to who we belong as well as to identify us to others as Christians, those who are called "*to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Peter 2:9). As God's beloved children, we are called to "*clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony*" (Colossians 3:12, 14). Clothed in these blessings that Christ bestows upon us, we are called to share these blessings with others at a time when a message of hope and light are needed more than ever. The hope that we can offer to this generation is the hope that the Gospel message has offered to every generation that has struggled with pain and suffering, with darkness and despair, with wondering if God is present and if God still loves God's people. We can offer a message of living hope that is rooted in the one who calls us to clothe ourselves with the steadfast love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord, who

calls us to walk as children of the light, “*for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true*” (Ephesians 5:8).

I never expected to have a theological conversation in the supermarket, but my mask served as a wear for me to “put on Christ” for the young woman I met. I don’t know what difference my words will make in her life that was obviously filled with uncertainty and anxiety; but I hope she and others in this generation will know that the hope we can offer as Christians is the hope that has been ours in every generation and in all circumstances, especially in times of darkness and despair: the confidence that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:38-39). The message of the love of God in Christ Jesus is the word of hope we offer to our fear-filled generation; for “*love has the power to build a community and to transform people’s lives in ways consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.*” (Israel Kamudzandu). In this time of uncertainty, we can share and embody the sure and certain hope that our Lord and Saviour, our Light and our Life, is with us always; “*the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*” (John 1:5).

Amen.