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November 29, 2020, 1st Sunday in Advent, Year B
St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana
"Keep Awake"

Mostly, I tried to forget middle school. At the time, I felt it was particularly horrible, but after more than a decade of teaching confirmation class, I think my time was pretty typical. Nobody's good at being a middle schooler. To this end, a few years ago, I archived a poem by the poet Ruth Hershey called "Syllabus for Eighth Grade," it reads:

Through this course
we'll explore the art of being thirteen
going on fourteen

We'll practice sitting on a chair
without falling on the floor,
posting in the class group chat
without hurting anyone's feelings,
having a crush on a ninth grader
without losing your dignity.

In our year together
we'll entertain a range of frequent emotions
without frustration being a frequent visitor.

We'll experience rejection,
heartbreak,
elation,
humiliation:
some days all before lunch.

There are tissues on the teacher's desk.

Bathroom humor will be tolerated
on a limited basis.

The teacher will try not to roll her eyes at you
if you try not to roll yours at her.
We'll read what many others have written
about being alive,
and we'll write what we think and feel,
or at least some of it.
Some of it we'll bury on the playground
when nobody's looking.

Evaluations will be gentle,
since nobody has ever mastered
the art of thirteen
going on fourteen.
Or any other age, really.
We're all just figuring it out as we go along.

Ready? Let's begin.

It is really that line “nobody has ever mastered the art of thirteen going on fourteen. Or any other age, really. We’re all just figuring it out as we go along.” Isn’t that the truth? We go around believing there is some trick to life, that if we can just figure it out, we’ll be set. Our schedule will flow from one activity to another, we’ll have enough margin to enjoy a leisurely cup of coffee with a friend whenever we feel like, our homes will be immaculate, our children’s lives without pain. But, there is no trick to this life. In addressing the tragedy that will befall his earliest followers, Jesus tells them there is no trick in life but this: keep awake.

There is nothing special about our texts today, despite what some Christian fiction writers will tell you, there is no prediction of some far-off future contained in this text. There is no prescription of signs in the Bible telling us when Christ will return. Jesus himself is clear about that: “about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” In some ways, this text is really meant for an earlier audience: one that can still hear the fall of the Temple, smell the burning of the city, taste the acridness. This passage assures them that Jesus knew this was happening; Jesus knew they would survive; Jesus knew his words would survive. One of the big changes of modern medicine is how we screen and watch for the very problems to which previous generations of our family succumbed. If your mom had breast cancer, we prescribe more and earlier mammograms. If it was colon cancer, enjoy some extra Go-Lightly - what a name! I have walked with any number of people for which the diagnoses is now a *relief*. They knew it was coming, and now it is here. Now they can address it head on.

It isn’t just medicine. This passage might yet provide a bit of comfort for us now, in any situation. Because there is no life untouched by tragedy. St. Augustine once said, “God had one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering.” The crisis in your life might very well be the crisis of modern life where we’re expected to have the perfect career, be the perfect spouse, be the perfect parent, raise perfect children, have perfect finances, maintain the perfect house. And not one of us is succeeding. Maybe the crisis in your life is the stiffening of joints, the missing of half the words someone is saying, the forgetting. And who among us isn’t in a crisis of loneliness right now, of fear for the future? And yet, Jesus said we would undergo suffering. When St. Paul gets ahold of the word in verse 24 - suffering, tribulation, the Greek is *thlipsis* - he describes the suffering of all kinds. He says, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship - that’s

the *thlipsis* - or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" And he answers his question, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus says that the answer to this suffering isn't to watch for signs and seasons - hypervigilance - nor is it the opposite - to hunker down and leave the world behind. The answer to the suffering is to keep awake. The answer to suffering is to be present to your own life. Thomas Merton once said, "You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."

Perhaps this text is a particular gift to us right now. Hours and hours stuck in our homes with just the same people to keep you company with all their foibles and follies, escapism seems so welcome. To imagine ourselves somewhere else, to imagine our lives quite different than they are right now. But this is our life. I'm not asking us to be Pollyannaish about this. Being present doesn't deny that this is *hard work*. Being present is the opposite: it asks us to name what is difficult, to pay attention to where it manifests in our bodies, to recognize how little control we have over our circumstances. Being present asks us to acknowledge what is happening long enough that it can stop being lord of our lives, and let Jesus take that place instead.

In Jesus's time, the great Roman slogan was "peace and security." This is what Rome promised its vassal, its lessor, lords. But Jesus exposed that for the lie it is. Rome destroyed Jerusalem in the name of peace and security. Rome murdered Jesus in the name of peace and security. America is not exempt from this critique. No politician will save us from the lies we feed ourselves. All we can do is wake up to ourselves. All we can do is be honest about our propensity to sin. All we can do is be honest about the brokenness of this world. Today's gospel tells us the end of something is coming: the end of innocence, of ignorance, of perfection - who knows. But after the end? After the end is where God does God's best work.

This is the year of Mark's gospel. And the thing to keep in mind about Mark's gospel is its ending. At the end, the women have come to the tomb, have found the stone rolled away, have seen an angel bearing the Good News, were told to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, but, Marks says, "The women said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." And then the gospel ends. How can this be? If they were silent, how have we come to believe? How will anyone come to believe?

Beloved, you are how anyone comes to believe. You are God's best work. You are the end of someone's suffering. You are the act of God this world is waiting for. You are the fig tree in summer. Jesus doesn't ask us to be prepared like a boy scout; Jesus asks us to be awake to the world. To be what this world needs. There is a line of art and poetry by

Gabriel and Matthew Andreas which feature pen and ink people. One of their poems is called "Deep End," it reads:

I used to believe
if I prepared
hard enough
and long enough,
I would be ready
when I needed to be.
But now I think
the closest
any of us
really get
to being ready
is feeling
not ready
and then
doing it
anyway.

Be present, beloved. Keep awake. Feel both pain and pleasure. Experience joy and sorry. In your life, in someone else's life. Being present is the discipline that most prepares us for what is yet to come. Because after the end, then the Son of Man comes in his glory. You don't want to miss this. Keep awake.
Amen.