

First Trinity Lutheran Church
Mark 13:1-8
November 18, 2012

The Gift of Present Time

We often hear talk that the end is coming. Some say the world is coming to an end very soon. In this Hemisphere, as the leaves fall from the trees and the earth goes brown and bare, the church contemplates the end as well -- the end of our lives in death and the end of the world with Christ's coming. The very idea that there will be an end is threatening too many of us. Talk of the end times has been called apocalyptic, and apocalyptic talk happens mostly when a disaster or war strikes. Missiles fly through the air in Palestine and Israel some might say the end is coming. Super Storm Sandy flooded parts of New Jersey and New York and those in the middle of it all might think the end is near. Hal Lindsey writes a book called the "The Late Great Planet Earth in the 70's and He predicted that Christ will return in 1988 that never happened. Some said September 11, 2001 was the beginning of the end. We even have a date predicted by the Mayan calendar that the world will end on December 21, 2012. On one occasion Jesus shockingly predicted the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which occurred in A.D. 70, but yet warned the disciples against sensationalism and speculation before His return. He revealed that widespread and intense persecution would signal His return, and that He will return in a great and glorious fashion. In Mark 13 Jesus repeated the verb "Watch out" or "Be on guard" four times to drum this thought into them (vs 5, 9, 23, 33). The first thing to guard against is false claims, false Christ's and false prophets, but that is not so easy to do!

What if we all needed to prepare for the end? What if you knew you had only one month left in your life? Would you finish up important matters at work? Would you travel to a place you always wanted to go? Would you pray more, go to church more, do that generous act you

always wanted to do for others? Would you find ways to leave a mark on the world? Would you reconcile a fractured friendship?

By answering yes to one or more of these possibilities, we indicate that in our last days we would be better stewards of the things God has given us in this life -- better than we are now. In the intensity of last days, we would live better, be better. We would be more generous, more focused on the most important things in life. The question is: Why do we need to be under threat of death to be better stewards?

Here's another "what if." What if we discovered that our congregation only had one more month to exist? If my congregation only had a month to live, I would want all the members to be together as much as possible. If only for one precious Sunday, I'd like to have everybody listed in our church directory together for worship. As members of a congregation at the end of its life, we would also have the great opportunity to decide what we wanted to do with our assets. Provided God or the bishop left that up to us, we would have a few million dollars' worth of real estate, cash and furnishings to disperse back into the local community

How would we decide what to do with the money? We wouldn't have time to fight about it. We'd have to focus fast and get our priorities straight. What would we support and what would we want our final legacy to be? We could help start a new ministry where none currently exists. Or we could support an existing one, endow scholarships, and build a youth center in town or a better shelter for the homeless. We could do so much -- if we had only a month left! We could be really great stewards of our resources -- if we only had a month to live.

If I knew my life would really be over in a month, I probably would jump on a plane and visit some places I've longed to see. But if I've got much more than a month, I have bills to pay and obligations to tend. But does our best stewardship have to exist only we are forced to live and act like when we only have 30 days left. Jesus calls us to do both: to live with the intensity

of last days while living our regular lives. End times call for alertness, sharpness. They tingle with expectation. They are times of uncertainty and fear only for those whose faith is thin. As Jesus said, you will hear of wars and earthquakes and famines, but it doesn't mean the end is near. You will hear of the comings and goings of institutions and cultures, but it doesn't mean the end is near. It may only be, Jesus says, the beginning of what was going to happen anyway.

So how are we to live in this world? Today we honor a woman named St Hilda. Her life can be an example of how we should live our life in these challenging days. Hilda was born into the royal family in in what is now known as Southwest Scotland in 614. She lived a quiet and devout life at the King's court for the next twenty years, and then decided to enter monastic life. Her wisdom and holiness soon drew the attention of the local bishop who appointed her Abbess, which is the name of a female leader of a monastery, a monastery she had only entered a year earlier. There she established the rule of life she had been taught as a child and she became known for her humility, her wisdom, her eagerness for learning, and her complete devotion to God's service.

Some years later, she founded the abbey at Whitby a seashore town on the east coast in North East England. Here both nuns and monks lived under her rule of justice, devotion, charity, and peace. So great was her wisdom that not only ordinary folk, but kings and princes used to come and ask her advice in their difficulties. "Hilda was a woman of uncommon common sense. When her own community was divided over the differences between the practices of Celtic and Roman Christianity, a conference was called was called at Whitby. Hilda was personally sympathetic to the Celtic tradition, but the conference opted for the Roman position. Hilda adapted to that decision and was one of the strongest proponents of peace. She knew there were far more important considerations, and that was living in a united community."

What might we learn from the life and example of Hilda of Whitby? First, humility, humility begins with a right assessment of ourselves. Joan Chittister, a modern-day Benedictine nun, writes “True humility rises from a right assessment of one’s self, an assessment that is without exaggerated approval or exaggerated disdain.” A truly humble person sees herself as one small creature in God’s wide world—a child of God made in the image of God, but also fallible and weak, in constant need of God’s mercy and help. Humility sees that each person is always in need of God’s grace and mercy and compassion, and we must always be willing to offer this same grace and mercy and compassion to others. Although Hilda was born to royalty, she chose instead to live a quiet and devout life, a life of devotion, chastity, peace, and love.

Finally, humility gives us a profound reverence for the earth and a sense of solidarity with all its creatures. It is a way of life, a way of being in the world that honors the earth and its creatures. “Humility,” writes Joan Chittister, “is the foundation for our relationship with God, our connectedness to others, our acceptance of ourselves, our way of using the goods of the earth and even our way of walking through the world, without arrogance, without domination, without scorn, without put-downs, without disdain, without self-centeredness.”

How do we cultivate the graceful virtue of humility? We might start by making an honest self-assessment, starting with what in us is good, strong, and skilled. These manifestations of God at work in us are cause for rejoicing. We might then consider our weaknesses, our failures and our sins—things we’re not so pleased about. An honest self-assessment helps us avoid an exaggerated view of our strengths and our weaknesses.

We might also consider ways in which we can stretch ourselves, and thereby develop a deeper and more genuine humility. We might, for example, choose to associate with those who are different from us, or really listen to that person who irritates or bores us. We might try to learn something that is difficult for us, or take on some new responsibility that we know will test

and challenge us. We might look for a way to stand in solidarity with poor, to come alongside them rather than to extend a hand downward to help.

We may wish we could know when the end is coming; but the reality is that's part of God's time. Regarding time we must realize that yesterday is history and there is not much we can do about it now. Tomorrow, the future is really a mystery, but today is a gift, maybe that is why we call it the present. As we live in the present God shows up in all kinds of places, working with us, for us, through us, and in us. You just have to look. When will this happen? Now. What will be the sign? When you see people acting as Jesus did right here and now.

May we learn to embrace and value every moment in our relationship with God and our relationships with those around us in the time that God has given us, in the here and now, in the gift of the present. Amen