

**SERMON by Rev. Jim Hill Grace Lutheran Church
November 19, 2023 PENTECOST 25
1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11
ADVICE FOR THE END TIMES**

In the late 1930's, Winston Churchill, who was a British MP at the time, warned the British parliament that there was a huge arms build-up going on Germany, and that Adolph Hitler was preparing for war. Not many MPs heeded Churchill's warning, and as a result, Britain was unprepared when, in 1939, Hitler started invading neighbouring countries.

It's not surprising that not many listened to Churchill. Who wants to hear bad tidings of doom?

These days, warnings of doom are coming at us right and left, not only from environmentalists and environmental scientists, but also from economists and politicians. They agree that the world is approaching the limits of growth.

"The Limits to Growth" is the title of a long and detailed report that first came out in 1972, fifty years ago. It was authored by the so-called "Club of Rome", an international group of experts who studied world trends. Their report said that the world could not sustain its current growth "population, food production, industrialization, pollution, and the consumption of nonrenewable natural resources".

I mention this because it shows that we've known about the limits to growth for a long time, and yet, unsustainable growth has just kept on going and going. And every time we pick up a newspaper we

can read about the consumers' desire for more and more, and the results in terms of deadly climate change, deforestation, ocean pollution, loss of forests and farmlands, etc. etc.

The latest worry is that in spite of the latest efforts, global warming and climate change isn't slowing down, but rather, it's speeding up! Even though almost all the countries in the United Nations have pledged support for the goal of "net zero" emissions by 2050, very few nations are actually changing their ways and reducing the output of pollutants.

On top of that, every time a war breaks out (as we have in the Middle East right now), pollution increases exponentially in that area of the world. So, even as we are mourning the loss of precious human lives to the ravages of war, the world's prospects for climate survival grow dimmer and dimmer. It's no wonder there's more and more fear and anxiety about the future.

Singer/guitarist Bruce Coburn (who's still around and happens to be exactly my age right now) – he once sang a song called, *How I Spent my Fall Vacation*. It contains a line that I'll never forget: ". . . sitting at home growing tenser with the times".

How blessed we are, you and I, to know that there is an all-powerful, all-loving God who is watching us, not "from a distance" as Bette Midler once sang, but we have a Creator-God who came near to us, in Christ, and became our Redeemer and Saviour.

This saviour, who still has well over two billion followers in the world today, came to earth to be our Shepherd, and to blaze a trail for his

followers, his disciples. This divine Good Shepherd showed us the path we must take, and we will take, through suffering and death, and eventually resurrection and beyond, into an unimaginably blissful eternal life.

Therefore, the Holy Scriptures exhort us again and again, in literally hundreds of passages: “Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Do not worry.” Do not fear because God is in control, and God will bring us through whatever trouble may come, whatever pain and suffering we may have to endure.

You and I are called by our Lord Jesus to be people of faith and hope, because God has the power to create and recreate. Our God, whom they called Yahweh in Old Testament times, is the Lord of life and death, so we pray every day for God’s guidance, and we continue to follow Jesus, who says to us, as he said to his disciples: “Do not fear, only believe.”

I don’t know if you’re a pessimist or an optimist regarding the future of our planet. I must admit, I am pessimistic. If current trends continue, we are heading toward a miserable end. On the other hand, our God is a God of miracles, as demonstrated in Jesus, and also in the phenomenal progress the human race has made since the time of Christ. So, who really knows? God might save this planet in a way we never would have guessed!

The Jews in Jesus’ day were under a very stable government, the Roman government. They were one of many countries in the huge and well-organized Roman Empire. Ironically, at the time of Jesus, they had more peace and prosperity than they’d had for hundreds of

years! In fact, a lot of diaspora Jews migrated back from other countries because Palestine was a more attractive place to live!

So, the Jewish leaders were not happy with Jesus, because he burst on the scene with these warnings of doom for Jerusalem, including the destruction of their beloved Temple.

The New Testament book of Mark, chapter 13, which I've chosen as today's Gospel Reading, is fascinating because it has not only a warning of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, but also a warning of the end of the world. These two warnings are almost blended together in this chapter. But that's typical of Biblical prophecy – it often applies to both the imminent future and the long-term future. Some Old Testament prophecies have even a triple application: they have meaning for the immediate future, for the long-term future, and for the End Times (the end of the world).

Exact dates are not important in Biblical prophecy. “Soon” is about as exact as it gets. (In spite of what some of the televangelists preach, who like to threaten audiences with predictions of the future.) Let me read what the apostle Paul wrote in chapter 13 of the epistle to the Romans (and this is from the New Living Translation):

[11] “...for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. [12] The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. [13] Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see.”

So, no matter how you look at it, the End is near. Some of us

nearing the end of our lives here on earth, while others of us are nearing the end of a stage of our life.

In these modern times, all of us are facing the end of the world as we've known it so far. We've had major transitions in every decade since World War 2. The new advancements we've had in science and technology are unprecedented in history. If Artificial Intelligence becomes as powerful as the tech billionaires hope it will become, then it will bring further major changes in society. It may be the end of the world as we know it, and the beginning of. . . what? A "Brave New World" like the dystopia Aldous Huxley envisioned? Will it be like the world envisioned by George Orwell in his book "1984 – where human beings are constantly under surveillance and totally controlled and manipulated? How will good overcome evil in such circumstances? How will God defeat the Devil and his angels, and win? How will our Saviour Jesus lead us through the frightening times that are sure to come?

Of course, we don't know. All we can do is have faith and hope in God's almighty power and love. We base our faith on the marvellous things that God has already done in the history of our world since the time of Christ. In our personal lives also, God has guided and blessed us in amazing ways. We've seen God's amazing grace.

So, whenever we worry about the future, we must go back and remember what God has done already, through his Son, through Jesus' incarnation, his cruciform death, and his resurrection. In Mark chapter 13, Jesus calls these events "birth pangs".

Jesus' appearance on earth, in itself, was a sign of the coming end

of the world, so we've known for a very long time that the End is coming. The difference is that, in our time, the signs are more manifest than at any other time in history. What I'm saying is, the important thing is not the timing, but what we do when we hear these warnings and see these signs.

What did Jesus tell his disciples to do?

According to the Gospel of Mark chapter 13, Jesus says 3 things: The first is in verse 5: "Beware." Beware of false prophets and false saviours. In other words, beware of easy solutions and quick fixes. Beware of seeing new technology as our saviour. Beware of depending on new scientific discoveries for our salvation.

Beware, also, of an increasingly negative attitude towards traditional Christian faith, as if Christian beliefs are superstition, and have done harm to scientific advancement, when in fact science grew out of the seedbed of Christian Europe, and the earliest scientists were unsuperstitious Christians! They were no longer scared of the natural world (which they had formerly thought were full of demons and evil powers), and these scientists and scholars felt free to study it and analyze it. The first universities were established by Christians, and Europe still has some of the best universities in the world today.

Going back to the 13th chapter of Mark, we read that the second imperative of Jesus is, "Do not be alarmed." It says in verses 24 to 26: "... in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened (and he's quoting from the Old Testament), and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers in

the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” The point is: Let us not be alarmed if any or all of these things take place.

The third of Jesus’ imperatives is in the last paragraph of chapter 13: “Keep alert.” Let me read verses 33 to 37:

“Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away (Jesus says); he leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore, keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

So Jesus gives his followers those 3 words of advice:

Beware. Do Not Be Alarmed. And Be Alert.

You and I can do this, because we have God’s assurance that God is always with us. God was there at the Beginning of creation (as it says in the first chapter of Genesis), and God will be there at the End of creation, as it says in the Apocalypse, the last book of the Bible.

Let me close with a few sentences from the end of the book of Revelation:

“I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her

husband. And I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, (behold) God’s home is now among his people!

... He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. . .”

... It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega (the First and the Last), the Beginning and the End.”

O, what a comfort to hear that! The same all-powerful God who was there at the beginning will be there at the end.

So, everything will be all right. We will be all right.

Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession for
25th Sunday after Pentecost November 19, 2023**

Let us humbly pray to our God, who is slow to anger and rich in mercy, generous and abounding in love for us.

O God, we pray for people around the world who are suffering from the effects of flooding, drought and famine, especially in Sudan, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. We pray for the community of Grindavik in Iceland living in uncertainty as to whether there will be a volcanic eruption. Provide all these areas with relief and aid from wealthy nations, and move their own leaders to be compassionate and generous, and to engage the help of their citizens to find long-term solutions to combat climate change.

O God, we pray for the people of Israel and Palestine, and for the neighbouring countries. We pray that you would protect civilians caught in the middle of this war and create safe passages for those waiting to flee and who are seeking asylum in more peaceful regions of the world. We pray that the leaders of Israel, Palestine, and other countries bring stronger, unified resolve in seeking a way towards a permanent cease-fire and eventual peace.

O God, we pray for the church throughout the world, that we, together with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, may be ambassadors of peace, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Help our churches be effective agents of social transformation, for the common good of all citizens. Renew each of us with Your Holy Spirit, and empower us to be messengers of hope, peace, and love.

O God, we pray for Your Holy Spirit to work among the leaders and citizens of our beloved country, Canada. Bless them with a desire to uphold the principles of a democratic country, and motivate all of us to love one another as You have loved us. Help us to appreciate the gifts and strength found in our diversity, that we may value and respect our differences. Strengthen our focus on that which unifies, restores, and mutually sustains us, as well as preserves this land we love. Bless us with the Spirit to be quick to forgive and slow to take offense.

O God, we pray for our National Bishop, Susan Johnson; for our BC Synod Bishop, Kathy Martin; our BC Synod Council, and all the pastors, deacons and lay congregational leaders, that You would inspire them to serve with diligence and care. We pray for the congregation of Metropolitan United who today are worshipping for the last time in their church building. Prepare them for their future as they merge with two other United church congregations into a blended new congregation, Broadview United. We pray especially for our congregation, Grace Lutheran, that You would guide us by Your Holy Spirit, so that we may discern a way forward, that benefits not only us, but your whole church on the south Island. Help us to trust that you are ahead preparing the way towards our future.

O God, we pray for those who are in need of healing, in body or in spirit. Give them strength for the journey ahead, on whatever path they choose to take, or must take. We name them now, aloud, or in the silence of our hearts ... We pray for those who are homebound or living in a care facility.

Give us love and grace, O God, so that we are moved to rejoice with those who are rejoicing and weep with those who are

weeping. Support those who are grieving, and help us to show compassion for our own selves, in our own losses and struggles.

Finally, dear God, in this upcoming week, we pray that in Your mercy You would grant us the grace to see what needs to be done and give us the courage and conviction to respond to others' needs with the wisdom and resources at our disposal. We ask for all these things, and whatever else is on our hearts for which we cannot find words ...

In the name of Jesus, the Christ, we pray.

AMEN.