

Mark 1:14-20

“The Appointed Time is Short!”

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (B)

January 21, 2024

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15).

Warning! Danger! This is an emergency! Alarms are going off. Gas is leaking. Water’s rising. Fire’s advancing. Tornado’s approaching. Don’t wait. Don’t waver. Ask questions later. Don’t worry about the lights. Don’t lock the door. Act fast. Don’t look back. Don’t look for or grab anything. Forget the phone. Forget the valuables. Get up. Get out. Don’t worry what you are wearing: pajamas, underwear, or naked. Just go! And hurry!

The prophet Jonah says it like this: **“Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** (Jonah 3:4). St. Paul puts it this way: **“The appointed time has grown very short.”** This world in its present form is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:29)! And Jesus says this, **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand”** (Mark 1:15)! **“Immediately [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed Him”** (Mark 1:18). **“Immediately He called [James and John], and they left their father”** (Mark 1:20).

Focus on the city of Nineveh, in the deserts and mountains, with temples and palaces. Cut to the kingdom of Judea, in Galilee and Palestine, with valleys and fields. Pan over imperial Corinth, amid Romans and Greeks, with seaside shrines.

A reaping is coming. The reckoning is commencing. Lighting flashes and thunder crashes. Earthquakes and hurricanes are rearing up. Hailstorms and hellfires are roaring forth. Famines bulldoze and floods steamroll. Planetary disaster. The abyss bursts open and beasts awaken, locust hordes swarm and rivers run red. Firmament peels back like a scroll, sun black as sackcloth and moon become blood. Heavenly bodies wobble out of orbit and stars plummet from the sky. Behold the horsemen of the apocalypse and elements melting, pelted by brimstone.

Human preferences have pressed the perimeters. But forces bigger than these will come with resolve. Human performances have flexed the fences. But fundamentals firmer than that are about to condense with vengeance. Human pursuit of pleasure has stretched the constraints. But principles deeper than the immediate pandemonium are going to consolidate for judgment. Human worship of power has tensed the tolerances.

But realities greater than this arrogant mayhem are starting to tighten up and soon will demand recompense. Human pride has bent the borderlines. But laws older than the violent moment can't help but straighten out for correction. Critical mass has accumulated. Heaven is getting ready to exhale. Almighty God is hollering, "*Enough!*"

On this Third Sunday after the Epiphany, which is known as Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, surprise pregnancy can come like this kind of emergency. Terminal diagnosis can cause this kind of anxiety. The abject panic, the existential dread threatens to drive us right out of our minds, or at least out of our right minds. Why else would we even consider something so otherwise reprehensible as intentionally ending life? One who is in such a situation may think, "*I might not survive this. The humiliation will annihilate me. I stand to lose my very self. My options and escapes have run out. I have to kill or be killed.*"

Drastic times call for drastic measures. But even elective abortion isn't drastic enough. Even embryocide or physician-assisted euthanasia isn't dire enough. The emergency that jeopardizes these circumstances exceeds physical discomfort and financial turmoil. The crisis that endangers our people eclipses psychological disfunction and social tribulation, limited resources and infringing upon liberties. The cataclysm that imperils us all looms larger than even primitive Ninevite savagery, Roman colonialism, Corinthian decadence, and Jewish disdain.

So, it's not just childbearing or disease that perpetrates the real wreckage. No, the primary predicament, the critical glitch, has hardwired itself into our nature and DNA. It's selfishness. The competition impulse. Survival of the fittest. The zero-sum formula for advancement only at another's expense. It's sin. Day in, day out. It's lifetimes of iniquity. Generations of deceiving and defrauding. Centuries of resenting and begrudging. It's ages of slandering and disobeying almighty God.

And He is coming. God's wrath is coming for each and every one of us. He will have you, toe to toe, head-to-head, face to face, eye to eye. He will demand ransom. He will require restitution. All our counterfeit prettiness, property, and popularity that euthanasia acquires will not suffice. The imitation pleasure, power, and pride abortion allows will not avail. Emergency will deprive us all of all that. That's how emergency always works. Can't grab anything to take with you. Can't go back again. Desert your belongings. Leave even the valuables behind. The only way out is through, and the only way ahead is naked.

So, God comes naked. God Himself comes stripped down. The great I Am gets involved, no adjectives, no predicate nominatives. With the urgency so intense, God personally intervenes as never before. He sheds His majesty and enters our emergency. God draws near and meets us square where we are with mortals, with His creation, with us, sinners. God breathes and He bleeds as we do. God sits and suffers alongside just how we must: working, hurting, and disturbed.

Jesus, Emmanuel, God become man, is the gestating embryo who reaches us. Jesus the frail fetus and flailing infant reaches us with bare grace and patience. Jesus, the baby in the manger, greets us. Jesus, who appears as an ordinary boy, encounters us. Jesus, the humble, gentle drifter, embraces us. Jesus, who appears to be the regular, mediocre everyman and common, normal nobody, embraces us with undiluted dignity and unadulterated sanctity. As the ad campaign says: "He gets us."

This God intrudes. This God invades. This God runs naked toward the emergency. This God throws Himself headlong into the disaster we brought upon ourselves. Jesus plunges face-first into our catastrophe and takes on not just our crisis but also its root cause: all human sinfulness. God holds nothing back to supply the sacrifice and to render the payment and to endure the punishment and to satisfy His wrath. Jesus the Christ comes, and He offers self and life in entirety to settle the accounts and to retire the debt to atone for man's sins.

God's naked grace invades to take us just as we are and make us just as Jesus is.

He takes us just as we are. He makes us just as the I am. His unshielded substitution justifies our survival and salvation, no matter how unqualified or inadequate. His stark-naked crucifixion clinches the ruptures and stitches the fissures, no matter how unable or unattractive. His defenseless forgiveness bridges the rifts, heals the breaches, and relieves the emergencies, no matter how feeble or obsolete you and I, or any of us may be, and indeed are.

You see, naked doesn't only mean death. Naked also embodies birth. We leave this life disrobed, but we enter existence unclothed as well. Jesus has made emergency the occasion for ending and for commencing. Emergent indicates coming forth. Crucifixion generates resurrection. Forgiveness fathers forevermore. Atonement births everlasting life. The slain Lamb stands raised again.

This Jesus ascended the throne of ultimate authority to embezzle death and vacate graves everywhere. The plane goes down, but the pilot gets the passengers out, and the pilgrimage goes on. The ship may sink, but the skipper recovers the sailors, and the crossing continues. So, our death in Christ leads to our resurrection in Christ. The power, the pride, the pleasure, the prettiness, property, and popularity – they never really mattered. The fellowship, the family, the kingdom, the community, the hearts and histories connected together, the lives bound one to another – *that* endures and outlasts even the emergencies.

Now, what about that alarm that is still sounding? Well, no need to panic. Proceed ahead in an orderly fashion. We will get through this and get out together. Jesus has prepared us for emergency. Perk your ears to the Voice of the One who's been here before, who knows the Way. Fix your eyes on Him. Don't look down or to the distractions around us. Let go of your false idols of comfort.

Your faith through the working of the Holy Spirit begun in your Baptism has quenched the flames and fireproofed you in Christ. The Lord's Supper stocks us to full at each Divine Service, so we are ready for any storm. Christ strengthens our faith as we float along day by day, head above water.

So, trust the One, the Great I Am, who became just as we are, and through Him, He makes us just as He is: righteous. Emergencies don't just build character; they build community. So, proclaim and put this into practice. And there is no better occasion for courage than a surprise pregnancy. And there is no better opportunity for compassion than a terminal diagnosis. Through the Holy Spirit's indwelling in you, you may change a heart or save a life – not just in this life, but also for eternity. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +

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<https://lutheransforlife.org>*