**Romans 8:1-11 March 29, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson, Romans chapter 8 here re-reading these words. “For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 There is a temptation as a pastor to comb through the Bible and find the perfect sections of Scripture when huge events happen in our lives that would make the readings not very applicable in a certain situation. You can imagine after the events of Pearl Harbor, of 9/11, and now even in the midst of this pandemic, that unprecedented times call for unprecedented actions and so the regular routine of following the lectionary would be suspended in the face of our current crisis. The lectionary is a series of readings that were put together years ago and they aren’t just chosen in the span of a month or even in the current year. But listen to this brief summary of the lessons for this morning and tell me if it doesn’t apply to what our world is facing in this present moment.

 We’ll start at the very beginning, with the words of the Introit, and I would invite you to download the bulletin so that you can see all of these readings in their entirety and use the bulletin as a resource to your own worship at home this morning. The Introit begins, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. I love the Lord, because he has heard my pleas for mercy. Because he has inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.” Later on, David speaks of how he suffered distress and anguish. His situation wasn’t one of pestilence, but rather one of political strife and fighting in battles and wars. But you can’t read those words and not think of your own anguish, your own distress, your own pleas for mercy, and find comfort in the words, “For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.”

 We move on the Old Testament lesson, arguably the most popular reading from the book of Ezekiel, found in chapter 37 where Ezekiel is told to prophesy over the valley of dry bones. When all you see on the news is a death toll that seems to rise, when death is at the forefront in our minds and in our lives, here we find an entire valley of death. A valley of bones, long dead individuals who couldn’t possibly be confused with someone who was sleeping or just sick. And God calls them back to life through the Holy Spirit. “Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people…….And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves…..and I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” Now we see the common thread amongst the readings showing itself, from the Introit “For you have delivered my soul from death.” And the Old Testament lesson “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” Words of comfort to those in fear of dying, at a time in our lives when death seems to be the main theme. How could we possibly look anywhere else than what God has prepared for us to meditate upon this morning?

 And it gets better. From Romans chapter 8, the words chosen as the primary text for this message. “For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” To think only on the matters of the flesh leads to despair because it can only lead to the realization that everything we strive for and make so important leads to death. I think it’s why the death of celebrities hit our society so hard. This year especially when Kobe Bryant passed away in a helicopter crash, we were forced to look at our own mortality. He was young, he was rich, he was famous and successful, and now he was gone. Even Kenny Rogers passing away reminds us that things are much different than they were during his most popular days long ago. Death is a reality, and to focus only on the needs of the flesh means that we will focus on death, but to focus on what God has blessed us with: the Holy Spirit, the gift that keeps on giving in our own Baptism leads to life, and peace. Now we start to see the specifics of how God “Has delivered our souls from death.” How it’s the work of the Spirit within us that means that “we will live.” And how our minds set on the Spirit brings “life and peace.”

 Finally in our Gospel lesson, the entirety of the account of the raising of Jesus’ friend Lazarus, we find grief, sorrow, confusion, joy and truly the core reason why Jesus came to this world, died, and rose again from the grave. I bring you two passages from this account that speak directly to our lives today in the midst of a pandemic. John 11:4, “But when Jesus heard it he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it’”. Here is the difference again, that Paul is talking about, and an easy temptation for us Christians to fall into. In this instance we aren’t talking about picking and choosing Scripture readings and ignoring the lectionary, but instead the temptation to speak for God in the midst of pestilence and disease. We, sadly, speak for God and put ourselves in God’s place in our lives, especially in the midst of a disaster. “God would never allow something like this to happen if he truly loved us.” “There is no good that can come from something as horrible as this.” And Jesus flips it on his head, even in the midst of an illness that kills his friend Lazarus. We have to wrestle with the fact that God is glorified even in the midst of tragedy, illness, and disease. To focus only on the flesh is to see only the death, pain, suffering, loss of time, loss of pleasure, loss of money, to focus on the earthly cost and despair. “I’m going to die God! I don’t have time for a pandemic! I don’t have time to sit at home and lose all of the experiences that I enjoy here on Earth! What about March Madness? Spring Break? My cruise? My vacation? What about me?” That’s the flesh talking, the sinful flesh that focuses only on earthly things. But what about setting our minds on the Spirit? That even in the midst of death, there can be life and peace? Hear these words from our Gospel lesson, John 11:25: “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Can there be any sweeter truth than this? That believing brings life through the source of life, our Savior Jesus Christ, and we believe only through the work, as we’ve seen in the other readings, of the Holy Spirit. All of these readings are interconnected, woven together with a similar strand of comfort in the face of dying and comfort in the knowledge that its not our own work, but the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that receives and clings to this salvation won for us by the Son of God.

 In a world of chaos, where things seem to keep getting worse every morning when we turn on the news, I ask that you take a moment to truly read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these sections of Scripture. That you take a moment of quiet contemplation, and sing a favorite hymn, whether it be one of the Lent hymns that were picked for this Sunday way back at the end of February, personal favorite hymns of mine like LSB 433 “Glory Be to Jesus” and LSB 431 “Not All the Blood of Beasts.” So that you stay connected to this lent season and not forget our journey to the cross and the empty tomb, even if we have a formal observance of these days during the Easter Season and not the specific Holy Week that was chosen for this year. But if nothing else pray the collect of the Day, the summary prayer of the lessons that says “Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.” And sing the closing hymn that was chosen for today, LSB 735, “Have No Fear, Little Flock”. Don’t hear the words of peace and life in this hymn and in this prayer with some sort of naive innocence, but know concretely that you are beloved by God, chosen by Him, and saved by His work and the gift of His Spirit. I long to be in worship with you, I am praying for all of you, God bless you and keep you in His grace now and always.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.