

Keeping Our Focus on the Promises of God's Word!

Dear Friends in Christ:

Sometimes I find the reading of the “*Gospel of the Lord*” - to which we often respond “*Praise be to You, O Christ*” - to feel less like “*good news*” and more like “*gloom and doom!*” In reviewing today's Gospel from Mark 13, it felt like I was watching a re-run of the ABC Evening News with David Muir - bombarded once again with “*bad news!*” Indeed, the “*signs of the times*” Jesus articulates to his disciples centuries ago sound very much like today's times: “*wars and rumors of war, nation against nation and kingdom against kingdom; earthquakes, fires and famines!*” (Mark 13:7-9)

No wonder our Lord, in prophetic fulfillment, warns his disciples then and now, to be “*on our guard*” - for His followers can expect to be challenged, questioned and rejected for our faith in Jesus and our witness to His name – yes, even “*hated*” for our values and views, cultural shifts so extreme that sometimes I wonder if the Christian faith will ever regain its influential, life-changing, sin-busting and hope-giving message! Oh my God, turn off the TV! Turn off the TV!

But just like ABC News concludes their broadcast with something positive, a feel good story and a happy, hopeful, made-in-America ending...so does today's Gospel Lesson, as Jesus promises His follower's that those “*who endure to the end will be saved!*” (Mark 13:13)

I don't know about you, but I need to reinforce that promise in my heart and life, because I've been finding it harder and harder in these Covid-19 and polarized times to live out my personal mission statement of remaining *"positive in times of challenge and change."* Maybe I've just become a 75 year old angry curmudgeon and grouch, my wife often reminding or scolding me: *"That's so unlike you to be so negative"* - especially when the reality at this stage and season of life is that we are still so incredibly blessed! So what's wrong Preston...what's wrong?

What's wrong is that sometimes I, like you, can get so caught up in the realities and struggles of the here and now, that we lose **focus on the promises of God's Word** - embodied and fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection and coming again of Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! I share this journey and struggle, because we all get down, overwhelmed, angry and negative sometimes, don't we? Indeed, the signs of the times and the situations, challenges and circumstances of life – to the delight of the Devil - can so often lead God's people to lose our **focus on the present promises of His Word** those *"who endure to the end will be saved!"* (Mark 13:13) It's a promise confirmed in the Gospel of John, where the Apostle writes: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* (John 20:30-31)

So let's take out the wrinkled pages of Holy Writ anew today, ancient words from the Holy Bible inviting us by God's grace to clean off the smeared lenses of faith! Holy Words so aptly described by the song writer Michael W. Smith as:

*Holy words long preserved,
For our walk in this world
They resound with God's own heart,
Oh, let the Ancient words impart
Words of Life, words of Hope,
Give us strength, help us cope!*

The re-focus begins then, not only with the promise of Jesus in the Gospel, but also with a deeper look at God's promise from the Old Testament lesson, where the Prophet Daniel warned the people of God about a "*time of trouble, such as never has been!*" "**BUT,**" Daniel continues, "*But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book...and those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above...like the stars forever and ever.*" (Daniel 12:1-3) Daniel, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "*envisioned*" the prophetic promise fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, whose name would be called "*Emmanuel, meaning 'God with us!'*" (Matthew 1:22-23)

In a simple, yet not simplistic way, we are reminded in the toughest "*times of trouble*" to claim by faith the promise that those who's "*names are written in the book*" shall have "*everlasting life!*" The alarm and the alert in today's Gospel is not "*look out below, or duck*" but "*look up*" and "*look forward*" for the One who is coming has come! He's the Christ, the Son of God, and the Babe born in Bethlehem's manger - the Savior who gave His life on Calvary's Cross - the Risen Lord who lives and reigns and will come again that we might be united with Him in heaven's unshakable kingdom forever!

So, my dear friends of Hope (HOPE!), when tragic times intrude and difficult days seem to go on forever, and the

negative news broadcast of life and death feels so incomprehensible and overwhelming, where do we “*turn*” and where do we “*look?*” Is the focus only on the disappointments and defeats; the sin, sorrow and setback that can so easily rob of faith and trust, joy and peace? Do we only “*focus*” on what’s going wrong around us, or do we embrace by God’s grace the gift of faith, **re-focusing on His “*Ancient Words of life, words of hope, praying give us strength, help us cope!*”**

We’re not the first believers, you see, who have struggled to keep it all together at times, and in fact, that’s what makes Scripture so powerful and personal and real because we see ourselves in it all the time! No wonder the inspired writer of the letter to the Hebrews encourages the followers of the Lord in today’s Epistle Lesson: “*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*” (Hebrews 12:23-25) I love that admonition, order, directive, command, instruction, prescription and precept from these ancient words of the Bible: “*Encourage one another, and **all the more** as you see the Day drawing near.*” **And all the more...!**

So, what “*more*” can I offer in this message that would be helpful in “*tough days and times*” that the Word hasn’t already promised? In fact, I had written another complete page to answer this question, but shucked it because the reality is there is nothing “*more*” that I can offer in this message that the Word of God hasn’t already promised - the victory over sin, death and the grave assured through faith in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who “*walks with us through the valleys of the*

*shadows!” (Psalm 23) If I, or you, get caught up in the negativity and criticism, cynicism and fear of these “days of our lives” how I pray someone will step forward to “encourage us **all the more**” to reconnect to God’s Word; to worship together in the Lord’s house; to kneel at His table where the Savior imparts pardon and peace; sending us home with “Words of Life and words of Hope, that Give us strength, and help us cope!*

May this be the outcome today in your life and mine as we focus on the promises of God’s Word! In the Name of Jesus! **Amen!**

Rev. Preston E. Wagner, Pastor *Emeritus*
Hope Lutheran Church, Wake Forest, NC