In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, Amos Chapter 5. It speaks of a bear!

18 Woe to you who desire the day of the L ORD! Why would you have the day of the L ORD? It is darkness, and not light;
19 as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; (Amos 5:18-19a, RSV)

It seems to me that we have some pretty solemn Bible readings before us this morning. My goal as preacher is to keep my eye on the ball, and to preach a sermon that is true to our Bible texts, lest it be said of me what my dear predecessor once said of another preacher. When I was a young pastor here at Immanuel, Pastor Raymond Schulze told me about a sermon he had recently heard that so upset him that he could hardly keep himself from standing up in his pew, shaking his fist, and shouting, “But that is not what the text says!” I do not want that to happen to me. I do not want to end up with a sermon that is actually contrary to our Bible texts, as uneasy as those texts might make us.

Neither our Gospel Lesson about the wise and the foolish maidens, nor our First Lesson about the day of the Lord and the bear are easy. Let’s begin with the First Lesson.

This past summer Carol and I visited Alaska, including the mighty Denali National Park. Denali is the highest mountain peak in North America. It is way up there, usually lost in the clouds. As we rode toward the great mountain, our bus driver pointed out wildlife in the park. We saw moose off in the distance. We saw eagles and elk. I especially hoped to see a grizzly bear. We did not manage to do that, but our tour guide told us about grizzly bears. The chief thing he wanted to emphasize is that if we should encounter a grizzly bear, by no means should we try to run away. We would not make it, he said. He said that every instinct in the grizzly bear is to chase down things that run away. And a grizzly bear is fast! Faster than Usain Bolt. Our guide said that a grizzly bear can move so fast it is hard to keep an eye on it. And so if we encounter a grizzly bear, our best chance of surviving is simply to stand still, or to fall down on the ground as if we were dead. Imagine that! Imagine being still as a grizzly bear checked us out, perhaps batted us around a bit with his
mighty paw. It would take nerves of steel to be still when encountering a grizzly bear.

   Why would you have the day of the LORD?
   It is darkness, and not light;
   as if a man fled from a lion,
   and a bear met him; (Amos 5:18-19)

What a stunning combination of ideas Amos preaches to Israel! Israel had always thought that the day of the Lord would be a good day. Not so, says Amos. The day of the Lord for Israel is going to be more like meeting a bear.

The problem for Israel is that she has become an unjust land. She is unjust to her own people. The poor and the vulnerable are being blown away by the strong and the wealthy. And so Amos declares:

   ...they have sold the upright for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals [says Amos]...they have crushed the heads of the weak into the dust and thrust the rights of the oppressed to one side... (Amos 2:6-7, NJB)

Justice in the courts has been corrupted. The hope of the poor was in those courts, but too often judgment was distorted by bribes. And so Amos thunders out against the unfairness of it all:

   O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth! (Amos 5:7, RSV)

   Earlier this week at my pastor’s booth I was very pleased to meet a young man with an interesting question. He told me that he was in college, though he seemed so young to me I would have thought him to be a high school student. His question for me concerned his eventual job. He told me that he wanted to serve humanity. He had a kind heart. But also he said that he would like to make lots of money because he wanted to marry someday and have a family and he wanted to have money to take care of his family. He seemed to fear that it was either/or – either he could serve humanity or he could make money. Well, I encouraged him as best I could to think that he could do both – that there are many jobs in this world that provide money to take care of a family, but which also serve humanity when they are well done.

   But the thing about Israel in the days of Amos is that she seems to have given up the question. Israel seems to have thrown in the towel on the question of serving humanity versus serving oneself. The rich simply served themselves. They lived in their fine stone houses, they lay upon their beds of
ivory, they drank their wine, but, as Amos said, they “are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (Amos 6:4-6). And so, the LORD announces the end of Israel:

   Then the LORD said to me, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them.” (Amos 8:2, RSV)

Amos gives the message to Israel:

   ...prepare to meet your God, O Israel! (Amos 4:12, RSV)

And Amos was speaking the solemn truth. When Amos began his ministry in Israel, around 760 BC, the land was prosperous and strong — unjust, but prosperous. By 721 BC, Israel was gone. She was swallowed up by the Assyrian Empire and disappeared from the pages of history. “The end has come upon my people Israel,” said the LORD, and it was so.

   Mind you, when we are talking about Israel, we are not talking about just another secular society in the world. Rather, we are talking about the people of God, the descendants of Abraham, the chosen, the inheritors of divine promises. To keep my eye on the ball, and to remain true to our Bible reading, I feel that I must warn us that it is a fearful thing to live a bad and cruel life and then to face God. It is like facing a bear:

   Why would you have the day of the LORD?
   It is darkness, and not light;
   19 as if a man fled from a lion,
    and a bear met him; (Amos 5:18-19)

   Now let us turn to our Gospel Lesson about the five wise maidens and the five foolish maidens. They are all maidens, but half of them do not make it into the banquet. What they lack is light. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had spoken of light. We repeat his words at each baptism:

   ...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.
   (Matthew 5:16, NRSV)

But these five foolish maidens have no light to shine. No oil, they say. Whatever the reason, they were expected to be shining when the bridegroom came, but they failed. And so they are excluded. The door is shut on them. It puts me in mind of a solemn saying of Jesus earlier in Saint Matthew’s Gospel:
“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21, NRSV)

As Jesus explains things, entering the kingdom of heaven is matter of bearing good fruit:

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 7:19, RSV)

Again I say, it is a fearful thing to live a bad and cruel life and then to face God. It is like facing a bear.

Do you see what I mean when I say that we have some solemn texts before us this Sunday? The challenge for the preacher is that he must go on and preach the gospel — the good news of Jesus Christ — without in the process undoing the first part of the sermon. I am duty bound to preach the encouragement of the Gospel, but I do not want to do so in such a way as to say, “Well, forget about the first part of this sermon.” No, I believe that it is true to the overall flow of the Bible to say that it is a fearful thing to live a bad and cruel life and then to face God. It is a fearful thing to fail to love our neighbor and then to pretend to love God. If we do that, we have quite an encounter ahead of us. Let us, then, think some more about the day of the Lord. It is coming. We will face it. Let us think some more about facing Jesus on that great and awesome day.

To begin, let us note that even Amos can hardly save himself from words of compassion and hope. His job was to announce the end of Israel, and he faithfully did so. But the heart of God is vast, and Amos does not hesitate to appeal to the Lord for mercy:

I said, “O Lord GOD, forgive, I beseech thee! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” (Amos 7:2-3, RSV)

Amos does not say that Israel is innocent, just that Israel is small. She is in need of the Lord’s compassion.

And then, at the end of the book of Amos, we suddenly read words of salvation. In fact, the very final verses of Amos are sweet words of promise:

13“Behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper

1 What a beautiful image of prosperity! The harvest shall be so full, that the gathering of the harvest will take so long that soon it will be time to plough the fields again for the next crop. The plowman shall overtake the reaper.
and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.

14 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.

15 I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land which I have given them,”
says the LORD your God. (Amos 9:13-15, RSV)

It is as Amos, if he would be true to the heart of God and if his preaching
would truly serve as sacred scripture throughout the ages... the man must
speak of the kindness of the Lord.

Likewise, judging by the preaching of St. Paul, there will come a day when
even the five foolish maidens will once again come into the presence of the
Bridegroom. They will be there, among the vast host of humanity, who will
bend the knee before Jesus Christ and will confess that he is the Lord, to the
glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11). They might be facing a bear, but
they will be there! That’s for sure.

Perhaps the best I can do to make sense of both the holiness of God and his
compassion is to lift up one of my all-time favorite stories about Saint Peter. It
is the story of his reconciliation with Jesus (John 21). Three times Jesus asks
Peter whether he loves Jesus. Three times, Peter answers yes, though, I
imagine, with a progressive lowering of his head as Jesus continues to press
him.

Peter had let Jesus down. Peter had sworn that he would never deny Jesus,
but he had – three times. Now, in the great reconciliation scene at the end of
St. John’s Gospel, Peter encounters the resurrected Jesus. It is rather like
encountering a Bear. It is an uncomfortable meeting. Perhaps the best and
truest thing we can say is that Peter survives that encounter with Jesus. But
also it is safe to say that Peter sure wishes he had not let his Saviour down.
Peter wishes he had not denied his Lord. He survives his encounter with the
Bear, but he wishes he had done better in his time of temptation.

Let it be so with us too. We wish for the Day of the Lord – of course we do!
We pray, “Thy kingdom come.” We long for the return of Jesus in beauty and
power – power enough to cast sin, death, and the devil right out of this world,
forever! So, we wish for the day of the Lord. But that day is nothing to be
casual about. It is a day when we might regret that in various ways we let
Jesus down, precisely in that we let our neighbors down too. In the time that
remains to us, let us turn this thing around. Let us prepare to meet our God.
Let justice roll down like waters, if we have anything to do with it, and
righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Let us prepare by loving more! by loving our neighbors more and by loving our God more, even the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.