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

My opening text for this sermon is from our Epistle Lesson, from First Corinthians, Chapter One. St. Paul writes this:

18For the word of the cross is folly to those who are
perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of
God. (1 Corinthians 1:18, RSV)

It is true: for many people in our world, “the word of the cross is folly.” But it is sad that it should be so. Our Psalm for this Sunday speaks of a “new song,” because the Lord has done something marvelous:

1Sing to the LORD | a new song,*
   for he has done | marvelous things. (Psalm 98:1, LBW)

But some people, I fear, will not permit their hearts to sing this new song. They fear that the “word of the cross is folly.”

Is our world really so discouraged that it can hardly believe the word of the cross? “He saved others. Himself he cannot save,” mocked the crowd at the crucifixion of Jesus. But are people so rocked by the blows of life that they can hardly believe that first part of the cry: “He saved others”? He actually saved them! The blind man, the leper, the woman caught in adultery, the disciples caught in the storm on the sea: Jesus saved them, and he can save you and me too. Himself he did not save, not because he could not, but because he would not. You are too valuable to Jesus that he should evade the cross for you. He chose to die rather than lose you and permit you to suffer eternal death.

But it seems that people can hardly permit themselves to believe or to sing a new song about this marvelous thing God has done. It is as if folks dare not believe such extraordinary good news as “the word of the cross.” That word is indeed good news. Our salvation cost Jesus death of the cross, but he was willing to accept that cross, because you are that important to him. I believe that if the human spirit were settled and calm and could really take in this morning’s Gospel Lesson, John 3:16-17, it would be happy at such news, even though that famous text depends upon the cross. It is right there in the words “… that he gave”: 
For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17, RSV)

Some people are of a condemning sort. They are critical. They are grouchy. They are judgmental. Perhaps they have been riled up by the newspapers or the political blogs they read. Maybe they are simply overwhelmed by a gap or a chasm they detect between the way things are versus the way they think things should be. Whatever the cause, they are of a condemning sort.

But our golden text says that our God is not the condemning sort:

For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Encouraging thought! Extraordinary teaching: that our Maker should have no desire or impulse to condemn us, but rather be willing to die for us, his creations... that he should be willing to die, even a horrible death on the holy cross, that you and I “should not perish but have eternal life.”

In our fallen world, the cross of Christ means that being willing to suffer for others is the way of God and therefore is right for us too. The way of the cross is built into the foundations of the world — into the very fabric of reality. It is Christ’s cross that saves us. And it is our cross that makes for a good and noble life for us in the years granted to us. It is our cross that continually bids us on toward love and even suffering for the sake of others.

But people have trouble believing this. To them, it too often sounds like folly.

More than once in recent months, I have heard a remark that sounds oh, so sad to me. It is a lament. It is a sigh. It goes this way. Sometimes an elderly person, sometimes a young person says to me, “I wish I could believe in Jesus.” Something holds them back. I say to them, “Go ahead and believe in Jesus. Live for him. You are free to do so. You are free to join the millions upon millions of people through the ages who have heard about Jesus and have decided to live for him, and have reached old age and have never regretted a thing, except their sins.”

So I say that to them, but there are obstacles. The chief obstacle is that many smart people in the world believe that the gospel is foolishness. St. Paul’s fear is especially apt in our generation. “For the word of the cross is folly...” declare many sophisticated modern folk. They want to be reasonable. They want to stand on their own two feet. They want to believe only what they can see with their own two eyes, as they think the intellectuals have taught them. They are under the spell of scientists who have stepped out of
their discipline and who have begun to speak of being and metaphysics and the meaning of life, or rather its meaninglessness.

I have had people stop by my pastor’s booth to try out their new conviction with me. They say, “There is no meaning to life except what I give to it. I am willing to be open about that. I am willing to be brave, to face a stark, meaningless universe and to say that: There is no meaning to life except what I give to it.”

So I ask them, “How is that going for you? How is that working for you?” And they say, “Great! I feel liberated. I feel that at last I have accepted responsibility for my life in this world.” And I say to them, “You are young and strong. And I can believe that your philosophy is working for you now. But I wonder how it will be for you when you face some great temptation to wrongdoing in this world. Or, how will it help you when become old and frail, or if you should suffer illness or enter a stretch of life in which nothing is going well and you are becoming ever more discouraged? If that should happen to you someday, I hope you will remember Jesus. I hope you will remember that he wants to be your Good Shepherd, that he wants to be your Great Physician of body and soul, that he is willing to be your savior if you are willing.” And the young person replies, or the elderly person answers, “I wish I could believe in Jesus.”

And so I come back to my chief proclamation to both them and to ourselves if ever we should need it: “Go ahead and live for Jesus. Cast in your lot with him. Join the generations of people, both simple people and sophisticated ones, who have heard about Jesus and who have made the holy resolve to live for him. Do not worry about your ability to answer every question. Take your stand along with the fisherman and the shepherd and the rustic and the saints who have given their hearts to Jesus and have gone on to live a good life here on earth, with hope of heaven to come. They have lived for Jesus here below, with hope of seeing loved ones again in heaven, and of seeing what the eye has not seen so far, nor has the imagination yet conceived.”

We are tempted to be like St. Peter of old, who declared that Jesus should never die on a cross. We resist the thought of the cross. We do not want either God or ourselves to take up a cross. And that is understandable. A cross is hard. But let us not lose sight of the fact that the death of Jesus on the holy cross means that our Maker loves us. That cross means love. He loves us in an extraordinary way. He loves us in a way that strikes many of us as “folly,” as St. Paul puts it, but let us not think so little of ourselves that we reject the notion that our God could love us so much that he is willing to die for us.

This is our way of living a divine life: the way of the cross. This is our way of participating in divinity: that we should accept suffering into our lives for the sake of others.
But the way of the cross is a way that can become lonely. We could use one another’s help to remain in faith. We could use each other’s help to give thanks for the cross of Christ and to walk in the way of the cross in the time left to us.

There is a saying that the discipleship teachers in the NALC have about the help we can give one another. I learned this saying at last month’s Convocation of the North American Lutheran Church—the NALC. The idea is that even very small Bible study groups can help us to maintain our faith while living in a world that often considers our faith to be “folly.” The saying goes this way: “Two students and one Teacher.” It refers to two Christians studying the Bible together, wanting Jesus to speak to them through the Bible. He is their Teacher. They are willing to be his students. It does not take a big group of people to study the Bible together. It could be just two of you meeting in your living room for coffee and Bible study. It does not take a whole army of people to help us along in faith. It could well be that your quiet conversations with one another before the worship service or during Coffee Hour could be the very means of grace by which Jesus helps us to continue in faith. If you pray each day, perhaps you could pray along with another person. If you study the Bible each day, maybe you could find another person to study the Bible with you. In such ways, we help each other in the walk of faith.

There are powers and principalities and spirits of this age, as St. Paul says, who oppose our faith and would dismiss it as folly. Do not let them prevail in your life. Let it be with you, and let it be with me, that we take our stand with the fisherman and the shepherd and the rustic and the saints. Let this be our holy stance: I believe in Jesus Christ and in his holy cross. And to him be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.