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

Today’s Bible Lessons speak of trouble — trouble down the road for humanity. Nothing is going to work right. Broken. Our reading from Daniel speaks of unheard-of trouble:

And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time;

Jesus too speaks of looming trouble in our Gospel Lesson.

7 And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet.  
8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs. (Mark 13:7-8, RSV)

These readings are what are called “apocalyptic texts.” They are about the end times of our human history. Christians have always been fascinated by these texts, and have often concluded that they are living in the end times. They look around, and the times seem so awful to them that they conclude that Jesus is coming again soon. Martin Luther certainly thought so in his generation. I often feel that way too in our generation. Perhaps you do too. In any case, it is proper for every generation to join the ancient cry with which the Bible ends:

Even so, come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22:20 KJV)

We repeat this prayer often, indeed, whenever we say the Lord’s Prayer and reach the Second Petition: “Thy kingdom come.” When I think of the murders in Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the wildfires in California, when I ponder the possibility of nuclear or biological warfare, and when I think of all the other wickedness and suffering and hunger and violence our world knows, I am glad to join the ancient cry: Come, Lord Jesus! Even if the end times should be frightening, I say, Let them come! Our world will be better off in the end. Much better!

Judging by what Jesus says in our Gospel Lesson, the troubles of this world, even at their worst, are not yet “the end.” Certainly, humanity has
known plenty of “wars and rumors of wars” and “earthquakes in various places” and “famine.” But Jesus says that these troubles are not yet “the end.” As I understand things, there is a happy reason for that: the End is the Kingdom of God. So, the troubles of which Jesus speaks are not the End, but rather the beginning of sorrows. Our Lord uses an interesting word to describe the turmoil prior to “the end”: he says that these wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes and famines are the beginning of the “birth-pangs.” Birth-pangs are deep suffering. If you have given birth or have watched your wife give birth, you know that. But birth-pangs often yield joy—profound joy. And so it will be at the end of our human story: The end of our story will be the kingdom of God, where there is no more death or sorrow or pain or sin and God himself shall wipe every tear from our faces.

I am quite sure that we are not there yet. I am quite sure that we are not yet in the Kingdom of God. Too many tears for that. Somehow, we are still on our journey toward “the end.” Maybe we are in the birth-pangs of the kingdom. Maybe we have not yet reached those birth-pangs. But we have today. We have this world we know and love. It is an awfully mixed world, with intense combinations of sin and sorrow, but also joy and virtue and love. It is the reality God has granted to you and me. By God’s grace, we are born into these days. And I think that our duty is to make the best of them.

So, in face of these apocalyptic readings, let our concern this morning be: the meanwhile, between now and the end. How are we to conduct ourselves meanwhile, until Jesus comes again in beauty and power?

For this, I want to lift up our Second Lesson. It is from Hebrews 10. It is the passage that speaks of the coming Day. That means the Day of the Lord. The passage goes this way:

23Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. 24And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:23-25, NRSV)

This seems so very wholesome to me. The Day of the Lord is approaching. It is closer now than it was for our grandparents. It is closer now than when we woke up this morning. Maybe it will come this afternoon. I hope so. But in any case, you and I have this moment, this time before us, and the Bible asks us to use it well. We are to “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” We are to throw in our lot with the kind of life Jesus wants us to live. We do not know when the Day is coming. But we know that Jesus wants us to live a good life now. And if we must live in the birth-pangs of the endtime, then perhaps it is even more important that we not let ourselves fall
to pieces, but rather that we turn to the kind of goodness of which our Epistle Lesson speaks. That is what I want to talk about in this sermon. Hebrews Chapter 10 gives us some good instruction for these days granted to us, however easy or trying they should be. Let us look at these good instructions, step by step.

The first of the apostolic exhortations is that, even if the birth-pangs of the endtime should be breaking upon us, we should not lose our faith in Jesus. And so we read:

23Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10:23, NRSV)

We might think to ourselves, “Well, at least this one is easy. I do not mean to lose my faith in Jesus. Ever! I mean to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.” And God bless you if we are able to say that. Still, there are times that might come our way that try our souls and threaten to wreck our faith. Our Gospel Lesson speaks of external turmoils — of wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes and famines. Such things can strike entire populations and rock the faith of the people. But also there are the personal and individual seasons of suffering that we might face even now. There might be financial or romantic or family disappointments. We might even be entering the valley of the shadow of death. There are the sorrows and setbacks that might be rocking us now or might be just ahead of us, down the road a little ways. This first apostolic exhortation urges us to not lose our trust in Jesus. Do not let him slip away from us. Let us not look up one day and admit to ourselves, “I no longer believe in Jesus. Why, look at me! I’ve stopped going to church, I no longer pray. I no longer think much about Jesus. He is not really a part of my life anymore.” Such things are possible for us. We are capable of drifting away from Jesus. But the apostle urges us against that. He wants us to hold fast to the confession of our hope, without wavering. He does not want life to become a godless matter for us. And he does not want us to drift into despair. The other things he recommends are going to be hard for us if we lose Jesus. So, let us not lose him. That is the first thing the apostle urges upon us.

Next, our text asks us “to provoke one another to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). It is a pretty impressive thing when we encourage one another to love and good deeds. It can change a life, it can save a soul, to say to someone, “You can do better than this. You can control your temper better. You can cherish the talents you have and stop wasting them. You really can be more loving. You really can be more like Jesus.” Do this, our text says. Provoke one another to love and good deeds. Especially this will be important in times of wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes and famines. In such hard times, the world is going to need people who speak up for love and good deeds. Let
you and me be among them, among those who speak of Jesus and of the love he asks of us.

Next, our text speaks of church. Jesus is coming again. The Day of the Lord is approaching. When Jesus comes again, let us not be found absent from church. The apostle puts the point this way:

24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some... (Hebrews 10:24-25, RSV)

Gosh! I think this means that even back in the fresh and innocent days of the early church, some Christians were neglecting church. I guess they were just too casual about it. Life was busy, bit by bit they became preoccupied with other matters, until finally their absence from church was so notable that the apostle feels compelled to preach against it:

25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some...

There are many reasons for coming to church. But I am speaking of love. How can we say that we love Jesus if we fail to come to where he has promised to be, in the preaching and sacraments of the church, where two or three are gathered together in his name? How can we say we love anyone if we do not take time to listen and to speak with the one we love? So it is with our relationship with Jesus. Our job and our life’s chief project is to love Jesus and to walk in his Spirit. To do that, we need to hear the holy Gospel concerning Jesus Christ our Lord, and we need to speak back to him in the prayers and hymns and liturgy of the church. We need to come to church.

This business of coming to church is related to the last of the exhortations the apostle has for us. It is a very general exhortation. It concerns encouragement:

25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Fighting the good fight of faith is easier if you have some company. And it is easier for your brother and sister Christians if they have your company and your encouragement. Luther believed that the mutual support and encouragement that Christians give to one another is one of God’s means of grace, to take care of us.

So, that is the counsel of our Epistle Lesson for these days, however troubling these days might be. We have not yet reached the end of the human story, for that end is the Kingdom of God. But we might well be in the birth-
pangs of that good end. Or those birth-pangs might lie ahead of us, up the road a ways. However that might, today's reading from Hebrews 10 asks us to use these present days well, to live them as if they are worthy of being the days of Jesus's return, as if we do not want to stand ashamed for Jesus to find us doing what we are doing.

I end with a saying by dear old Martin Luther. It is a saying I love. Sorry to say, there seems to be no actual documentation for this saying, and yet it does sound like our great teacher of old. I first heard this saying back in Seminary days. Luther said this:

Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant an apple tree today.\(^1\)

Well, the world *might* go to pieces tomorrow. But in the end, that world is in the hands of Jesus, and he is trustworthy. He is worth living for. Tomorrow might bring even more chaos, but we have today, day by day. Let us continue in our Christian faith, let us continue coming to church, and let us encourage one another to love and good deeds, in the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.