In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Annie Dillard’s short and pithy book, *Holy the Firm*, she writes about her fourteen-month stay in a little cabin in the Puget Sound off the coast of Seattle. This fourteen-month stay came immediately on the heels of winning the Pulitzer prize for her previous book. Fourteen months in a little cabin overlooking the sound, and she produces what is, in my mind, a miniature masterpiece. The three-chapter book ends up following the events of her experience of just three days in the cabin. The final day is Sunday, when she goes to church. The book turns out to be a beautiful and haunting reflection on the nature of the Church, a reflection on what the Church is. She remarks that it seemed absurd that in that congregation, women would wear sunhats and bonnets when they came to Church. Now, she wasn’t saying this because she thought the sunhats unfashionable or outdated, or some sort of hangover from stricter days. She didn’t think Saint Paul was being repressive when he gave instructions for head coverings. Instead, Annie Dillard said that everyone who comes to church should be wearing a head covering, but what we should all be wearing are crash helmets.

The gathering together of the Church is the place where heaven meets earth. The gathered assembly is the place where the final reconciliation of all things is beginning to take up space on earth here and now. The Church is where the final Day of Christ’s coming starts to push itself into our midst. Don’t let the sturdy and mostly uncomfortable wooden pews deceive you, for here we are all being transfigured, we are all being made new. So perhaps then we are all just a bit in danger of whiplash when we come together, and a crash helmet is just what we need, for Jesus Christ is turning upside down our ingrained expectations and assumptions. The values and ideals of this world are being torn open, and the shallowness and shortsightedness of those values and ideals is beginning to be exposed. This is a place where the systems of this world are being undone, and where all unholy and unjust structures and establishments are beginning to be subverted.

But this is not accomplished with might or power, or at least not with our own might and power. Corrupt systems and unholy establishments are being subverted through something that looks much more like our Gospel lesson—caring for the one who needs it, and, even more, being cared for by the one who always remains a bit strange to us. The long-term subversion that is the
Gospel takes root in us when we recognize that we ourselves were the ones in need of being rescued. We all too often want to think about ourselves as being the ones able and capable, in positions of power and influence. But it is rather the case that we are all much more the ones who were beaten, stripped, robbed, left for dead. Someone altogether strange to us, a Jew born out of wedlock who claimed to be and was and is God in the flesh, this Stranger came and rescued us. When Christ does this, the death that runs rampant in this world is being undone, all of the systems and laws and structures of this world that are opposed to life, opposed to the glorious freedom of the children of God—they are all being torn down. This is what Saint Paul means in our reading from Colossians when he says that we have been “rescued ... from the power of darkness and [have been] transferred ... into the kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13, RSV).

We have been transferred to a new kingdom, and this kingdom comes with its very own ways of thinking and being and acting. You might even say it comes with its very own politic. Our politic is not based on anything other than the very Word of God made flesh, he is our polis, he is our kingdom and our city. So the politic of the Church is not based on fear, neither is it based on our efforts to bring the kingdom of God to earth. There is no gerrymandering necessary to bring this kingdom about—for it is already here, and we are already placed there. This is a place where a new politic is given to us, for we have been transferred to another kingdom, another city, with another King.

So then, what would it look like for us to not work at bringing about some unknown or better future, but to work at living in the light of a future that is here in our midst even now? How would we order our days if the reality of the final reconciliation of all things was already accomplished and being given to us here and now? How would we speak to one another if the person in the pew behind you was a citizen of heaven already, were someone else being transfigured because Christ picked your neighbor up too when he or she was left for dead? How would you welcome someone who for the first time visits this heavenly and transfiguring community? What would you be thinking when you woke up Sunday morning and were trying to decide if you would come to church or do anything else?

I am convinced that worship folders are not simple instructions on what to say and when to sit or stand. The worship folder is a playbill in disguise—a playbill for the drama of creation and redemption and final consummation. Everyone who takes hold of this playbill becomes, not a member of an audience, but a supporting actor or actress. This is the natural work of the community of the resurrection, the community of final reconciliation, the community of Jesus Christ on earth. The Church is Christ’s own body filled with the life of eternity already.
Now, of course, this is not something that we can yet see. It is not now the time for seeing. It is not the time for holding it and touching it. This is because it is not yet the time for holding and embracing Jesus. After all, this is what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene on the morning of his resurrection. But this doesn’t mean Jesus is any less alive, and it doesn’t make the Church less true. Now is the time to receive the Kingdom of God in faith. Now is the time to receive Christ in faith. Now is the time to even receive one another in faith. We receive one another not by the way that we see someone now, but for who someone is in Christ, for who someone is as a fellow transferee to the kingdom of heaven. Now is the time where the future community of the Kingdom of God is spread throughout the world, but it is veiled even to itself. Who we are is hidden to us, who our neighbors are is hidden to us—but we receive one another as Christ has received us.

And how has he received us? How might all of this look here and now? We are given a beautiful image of this in the parable of the Good Samaritan. But, the first thing that all of us need to recognize is that, in this parable, we are not the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan is Jesus Christ. We are not put into this world to save it or redeem it, for that has already been done. Our primary goal and purpose is not to change the world, we are told to come to Christ and to be changed by him. Only when we are changed by him are we capable of changing things for the final and undifferentiated good that this world needs. The Church is not first the community that loves one another perfectly and fully. The Church is the community that has been left for dead at the side of the road, but has been picked up by our own Good Samaritan, and placed in the inn. That inn is the Church. We are still in this inn, we are still all on our way to healing and recovery. We are all still waiting for the Good Samaritan to return. Only when we know this, only when we allow ourselves to be the one in need can we ever fulfill what we asked for in the prayer of the day, that we would be a neighbor to those in need, only then do we affect something fully good in this world.

Now, this is my farewell sermon. This is my last chance to point you to the reality of Jesus Christ, to show how he is for you, to show how he has bearing on every aspect of your varied and diverse life.

If I could give one last encouragement, if I could convince you of the importance, indeed, the necessity, of one last thing, it would be this—do not give up meeting together, do not give up gathering together, do not leave the inn that our Good Samaritan has placed all of us in to wait for him to return. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the author says that there has been great suffering and persecution. Blood has not yet been shed, the writer says, but on account of this suffering and persecution, some have abandoned the faith. What does the writer encourage in the face of such persecution? How shall
trial and temptation be endured? Shall they flee to the hills? Shall they return to former ways of thinking, or simply privatize their faith into a merely inward reality? The author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells them, “[Let us] not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25, ESV rev.). Let us not neglect meeting together. This is God’s given means for enduring persecution, this is one of the main ways that we are sustained and encouraged in our faith.

What this world needs is not faith in general, what this world needs is not just faith for its own sake. This secular world has no shortage of faith. What this world needs is faith in Christ. In our increasingly pluralistic and secular age, let us not be bashful or ashamed about saying this. Every week we confess that we were created by God in Christ, for God in Christ. What our world needs is Christ. There is no other way that we are promised that Jesus Christ will be with us: “where two or three are gathered together in my name,” that is the promise. We have no other access to Jesus Christ.

None of us can continue in the Christian faith on our own. None of us can continue believing on our own. We need the people of God, we need a community that will sustain us in this faith. In last week’s Gospel lesson, Jesus sent out the seventy disciples to proclaim the Gospel to a hungry world. But he did not send them out alone. Jesus sent them out two by two. Each one had a companion. Jesus sent out little churches, little microcosms of the community of faith that is the church. In the Church of Jesus Christ, there are no individuals, one who can be divided from the rest. We need this fellowship so that we will continue in the faith. “The harvest is plentiful,” Jesus said in last week’s gospel lesson, “but the laborers are few.” We cannot be harvesters on our own, we need the strength of the community of the Church. There are many things in this world that work against our faith. But one of the main ways that faith is antagonized in this world, is through keeping us from coming together. This happens in all sorts of ways—through busyness with work or school, through the plethora and easy availability of all kinds of entertainment. All of these things can deaden our senses and keep us from recognizing just what is taking place when we gather together. You might say that they keep us from seeing the need for crash helmets.

For this gathering, the gathering of the Church around the Word of God and the Bread and the Cup, is unlike any other gathering of people in this world. We are not simply or merely a gathering of like-minded individuals who happen to gather together. Rather, we are gathered together because the Spirit of God is forming a Body for Jesus Christ, as he did when the Spirit came to Mary. You are that Body, the Body of Christ which gathers together on the corner of 88th Street and Lexington Avenue.
But this reality is not entirely hidden either. For, people of Immanuel Lutheran Church, I have seen the reality of Christ at work in you. I have seen you be the Body of Christ. I have seen your love, I have seen you share your lives with one another, and with my family and me. I have seen Christ in you, hidden yet revealed. When you come together, God himself is in your midst. The presence of the power that created the universe is in your midst. As our reading from Deuteronomy put it, the Lord is not far off, he is not away up in heaven so that someone needs to go up to heaven to bring him to you, he is near to you, he is in your mouth and in your heart—he is yours, and you are his.

My final words to you this morning will be the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that I referred to already:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 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. (10:19–25, RSV)

To the Stranger in our midst—to our own Good Samaritan—be all glory and honor and praise, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen