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

My sermon this morning is directed against discouragement. I am trying to help us along in the good fight against low spirits.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Ecclesiastes. We can hear the voice of a discouraged person in this reading. Consider what he says about a lifetime of labor:

2:18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; 19 and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:18-19, RSV)

Our text expands upon the notion of vanity with some famous words — words about chasing the wind:

14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 1:14, RSV)

It is rather hard to strive after the wind. You cannot see it, you do not know exactly which direction it is heading, and even if you could catch up to the wind, how are you going to grab hold of it? This notion of striving after the wind is a great image of futility, of wasted effort, of work done in vain.

Only, I believe such discouragement is wrong and unnecessary for a Christian! It is true that a lifetime of toil under the sun might result in leaving your inheritance to someone who is a fool. But I am claiming that this is not vanity. This is not a mere striving after the wind. If those who inherit our lifetime of work are wise people or fools...either way God bless them, and we can pray that our inheritance will help them along in life. Even if our inheritors should be fools, they might not be fools forever. It might be just a passing phase in their life, on their way toward wisdom. Indeed, perhaps our inheritance will help brace them up and lead them away from foolishness. Laboring for a lifetime under the sun and leaving inheritance to those who come after us... I claim that this is not a striving after the wind. I think it is part of love for our families and congregations and other good causes. I figure that it is a good thing to do if we are able. So, this is a sermon against that
discouragement that questions even the importance of a lifetime of work and inheritance for those that come after us.

There is a phrase in this morning’s Epistle Lesson that I think can help us in the good fight against discouragement. I mean St. Paul’s phrase about our life being “hidden in Christ.” The verse goes this way:

2Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Colossians 3:2-4, NRSV)

Here below, in this earthly life, we probably look a lot like other folks. We are living for Jesus, and we do not regret a moment of it, yet to onlookers, we look like most other people. We have hopes and dreams, sorrows and setbacks like everybody else. We get older, we lose a step, we suffer accidents, we get sick, we lose friends. We have highs and lows, joys and disappointments like everyone else. We lie in hospital beds or nursing home beds, wondering whether we are going to make it or how much longer we have. We worry about things — same as other folks do. We worry about the economy and the environment, about civility and courtesy in our communities, about murder and mayhem in our land, about life for our children or those generations still to be born. In many, many ways, we are like our neighbors, trying to make it through life, going a day at a time.

And God bless all of those neighbors! But St. Paul would have us know — and to be encouraged in the knowing — that if we have given ourselves to Jesus, our life is “hidden with Christ.”

Let me give you a comparison. I am thinking of the Mount of Transfiguration. On that holy mountain, the truth about Jesus was suddenly revealed. For a moment or two, or maybe for an hour – we do not really know the length of time — but for some stretch of time, the glory of our beautiful Savior was no longer hidden. The truth of him could be seen by Peter, James, and John. His face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light (Matthew 17:2). No Pilate Pontius was interrogating him, rather he enjoyed holy conversation with Moses and Elijah. No soldiers were mocking him or crucifying him. No storm was raging on the sea, no Satan was tempting him in the wilderness. Instead, on the holy mountain, Jesus enjoys peace and fellowship and his beauty is revealed.

Afterwards, he goes down that mountain and re-enters the conflict with sin, death, and devil. He returns to a regular way of life — a way of life in which his beauty and his glory are hidden. No more garments whiter than any fuller on earth could make them. No more radiance like the sun from his face. But it is all there! His beauty is there, hidden for now, but destined to be revealed to all eternity.

Likewise with us. One day, the world will get a second view of us. So far, our neighbors have known us as we appear to them, in ordinary ways. And let us hope that they are encouraged by what they see in us. Still, so far, onlookers simply see us looking like pretty much everyone else. St. Paul says of us that our life is “hidden with Christ” but that one day our life will be “revealed with him in glory.” I imagine this to be like a replay of our earthly lives before the universe, only this time the beauty of our lives in Christ will be revealed — no longer hidden. Here we are below, trying to live for Jesus as best we can, having ups and downs like everyone else. But in eternity it will be seen that our lives have been beautiful in the eyes of God. We will enjoy our own Mount of Transfiguration someday. Then, the world will see a kind of radiance in us that is hidden from them at present. It is the radiance that belongs to the friends of Jesus who have been trying to walk as he walked. It is a radiance that goes beyond anything we could muster or deserve. It is simply a radiance that Jesus gives to us because he has given himself to us.

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. The man must think that he is master of all reality. He has forgotten all the things that can go wrong in life. His words are full of self-confidence:

19And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry. (Luke 12:19, RSV)

It is a foolish way to live, to forget about God and to forget about death and eternity. But that is not my main point about this story. My main point this time is that Jesus is not such a rich fool. If ever anyone could have said,

Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry...

...it would have been God the Son, safe and sound at the right hand of God the Father, from all eternity. But the Son did not play it safe. He did not cling to his divinity, but descended to earth, was born of the virgin Mary, and lived a life for you and me and all humanity. He came among us, to invite us into his holy way of life. And he intends to reveal our glory in all eternity. Meanwhile our life in him is hidden. Hidden for now, but not for always.

Alright, now let us turn again to the subject mainly on my mind: the good fight against discouragement. I have made mention of the lament in
Ecclesiastes that everything under the sun is vanity and striving after the wind. Suppose you are feeling that way. Suppose you are feeling weary with your work and down-hearted. You get up each morning, peddle away at your job all day long, and come home wondering whether it amounted to much. You do not seem to be getting ahead. You are getting older, but you do not seem to be getting wiser or wealthier. Time lies heavy on your hands. Life seems to consist of one doggone thing after another, and you are starting to wonder about the meaning of it all.

The apostolic exhortation, then, is that we should look above, to Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God. We are to cast our thoughts to Jesus and to discover our truest and best selves in him.

By rights, Jesus could have been discouraged in his earthly life. He was a talented man, obviously, yet he was a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). He had friends, but they seemed thick-headed and fickle, and they let him down a lot. He was young, but he had a true sense that he did not have much time left. If any of us are sick or elderly, we might understand that. We might wonder whether many years are left to us. Jesus knew that his years were rushing on toward a disastrous outcome, even death on a cross. All of these things were true of Jesus, and yet we do not find him discouraged after the manner of Ecclesiastes. He does not conduct himself as if all is vanity and a mere striving after the wind. Even when he was a child and his parents sought him in the temple, he spoke of work he needed to do:

And he said to them, “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49, RSV)

In the midst of his ministry, he spoke with urgency of his work, saying,

*I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! (Luke 12:50, RSV)*

We who would put to death the discouragement that is dragging us down should look up to Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God the Father. No matter how uneventful or unimportant our life might be, we can think to ourselves, “I am like Jesus in this. He was a poor man with fickle friends and not much time left, but it is his way to go ahead, trusting that his heavenly Father will bring good from it all. It is his way to proudly press ahead no matter how discouraging the circumstances. And he is beautiful in his life of love.”

If the world should seem puzzled as to why we do not seem discouraged, and why we hold our heads up in spite of lowly circumstances, we will think of Jesus. We will remember what the apostle says—that our life is hidden with him.
The world might consider us to be lowly and down and out, but we can think to ourselves that if they could only see, they would see that our garments are whiter than snow and that our faces are radiant like the sun. We have a beauty that will one day be revealed, for we belong to Jesus. Before puzzled onlookers, wondering how we can be so happy in poor circumstances, we would try to explain to them, “I know that I look unimportant to you now, but the truth of my life is with Jesus. Just wait till you see me as I really am! Just wait until you see me in eternity. Just wait till you see me with Jesus. These years below are but a prelude to my true life. They are just a narthex to heaven. And I mean to live these years below as I really am — someone whose life is hidden in Jesus Christ, but someone whose life is very good because of Jesus Christ.”

And so it is that Christians are invited to measure life according to a different and more hopeful standard. We are invited to move our thoughts away from sin and discouragement and to lift them above to the One to whom we belong and who loves us overwhelmingly, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.