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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Christ the King Sunday, November 26, 2023
Matthew 25:31-46

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

One of the first phrases that popped into my mind when I was reading over today's lessons is something you might find in a gift shop or on a t-shirt, not the Bible. "Keep calm and carry on." I am sure you know what I am talking about. I bet the minute I said that, just about every one of you pictured it in your mind. Printed on red, beneath a graphic of the Tudor crown, the words: Keep calm and carry on. If you haven't seen it as a poster, you've seen it on a tea towel or a mug or on some other novelty merchandise. You've probably seen at least a half dozen riffs on the slogan too.

In 1939, Great Britain was on the brink of WWII. The blitz bombings by the Germans hadn't begun yet, but the government knew that it needed to boost morale and keep people from panicking. There was great fear and uncertainty. There was war and rumors of war. But that just meant that the times called for greater fortitude and renewed commitment to doing what had to be done, to carrying on with life to the best of one's ability and staying true to one's values, even in the face of possible pending disaster. So the British Ministry of Information commissioned a series of morale-boosting posters, and although it was not used widely during the war itself, *Keep Calm and Carry On* ultimately became the most famous of them of all when it was rediscovered in 2001 and suddenly started appearing everywhere.

Today's Gospel lesson, which is my text for today, is the last segment of a longer section that began at the start of chapter 24. It is often referred to as the Olivet Discourse, because it is the record of teachings that Jesus delivered to His disciples from the Mount of Olives. And it all started when those disciples came to Him concerned. Jesus has switched to frighteningly apocalyptic language; He has just predicted the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and other dire events. Can we blame the disciples for coming to Jesus and asking Him to explain? "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming at the end of the age?" (Matt 24:3) In other words, we want to be

prepared. We know you have been warning about the tribulation to come. If there's going to be a blitz, we deserve to know about it.

The theme of my sermon today is Jesus's response to His disciples. He develops that theme over the course of the two chapters, and He finishes with today's text. And the essence of His message is not so different from the message emblazoned on the red British Ministry of Information poster – Keep Calm and Carry On – although if we were to make our own poster for this occasion, we would have to portray a very different type of crown for Christ our King.

When the disciples ask Jesus that question – when is it coming and how will we know – the first thing we should notice is that Jesus doesn't actually give them a direct answer. But He doesn't do any false soothing either. The disciples are absolutely right in picking up on Jesus's warning tone. The Day of the Lord is coming, there will be judgment, and there will be no escape. When the King returns, He will not come again as a little baby born in a stable. No, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from heaven, and the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And there will be wars and rumors of wars and famines and earthquakes and many will be delivered up to tribulation as others fall away and the love of many grows cold.

It's all there in Matthew 24 if you want to go back and read about it.

It is perfectly understandable if this makes the disciples anxious. They have cast their lot with Jesus and they at least want to know how to be prepared for the inevitable fallout when the majority, who have rejected Jesus as their King, have to face Him again. Maybe they want to know if they're supposed to fight or rally the faithful in some way. Maybe they worry (or perhaps they hope!) that they will be called upon to do something heroic. I am pretty certain they are hoping they will be told that they personally will be spared from the worst of whatever is coming. Or that they will be reassured by Jesus, *you* have nothing to worry about, *your* position in the Kingdom is a foregone conclusion.

But Jesus tells them none of that when they come to Him privately with their concern. He doesn't promise to spare them from tribulation, and He doesn't hold back from describing it either. He also doesn't give them

any top secret instructions about what to do in the event of apocalyptic upheaval.

He says to them, in essence, keep calm and carry on. He tells them the Parable of the Ten Virgins. The message of that parable is that you need to be prepared and found at your post when the Bridegroom comes; no extra heroics necessary. The readiness is all. He tells them the Parable of the Talents. You need to do something with the gifts and the grace that you have been given, not become paralyzed with fear or hardheartedness and get in the way of God's work. Both of these parables depict a world in which followers of Jesus are urged to carry on doing what the Lord has taught them to do as though everything were business as usual. The essence of these parables is that we should live well each day so that we do not have to be afraid of tomorrow nor ashamed of yesterday.

It's a familiar Advent theme, and we are again heading into Advent. Be prepared. The Lord came to us as a Baby, and when He comes again it will be in kingly glory, but we do not know the day or the hour. The mystery of His return – the fact that we are not privy to any more details beyond knowing that He will come again - means two things. One is that we have no business probing into what God has chosen to keep hidden, and the other is that above all else, we must beware of complacency.

The final pericope in the Olivet Discourse, the Gospel lesson which is my text for today, warns that when Jesus returns there will be a great sorting. The sheep will go to the right, those who have heeded the call of the Shepherd, and the goats will go to the left. The sheep will go on to everlasting life; the goats will go on to eternal punishment. It's a frightening image.

It's even more frightening when you consider that Jesus is still addressing His disciples privately. This was not a triumphal message directed at Jesus's enemies; these words are directed at His *followers*. The warning is meant for them. Even those who think they are secure, even those who imagine they are part of the inner circle, can be deceived. Thus, there is no room for complacency in a life of discipleship. The gist of all the stories that make up the Olivet Discourse is this; do not let yourself be caught unaware and unprepared.

One of the saddest phrases in the English language is “if only.” If only I had spent more time with my children. If only I had saved better for retirement. If only I had taken better care of my health. If only I had put more effort into my relationships. If only I had not followed after the wrong crowd.

We can imagine that the five foolish virgins said to themselves, if only we had been prepared with oil in our lamps! The worthless servant who was entrusted with one talent said to himself, if only I had invested that talent and aimed to please my Master, rather than burying it out of spite!

Jesus does not want His followers to look back on their life with regret and sigh, “if only.” He does not want them to be unprepared for His return or unprepared for the day that they will face Him and have to give an account for all that they have done. And so we come to the climax of this discourse. The disciples have been waiting. How exactly are they to prepare for the Day of the Lord? How are they to avoid eternal regret? How does Jesus expect them to keep calm and carry on in His absence?

This is what He says.

“Come, O blessed of My Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.”

I cannot help but wonder if the disciples who first heard these words found them somewhat anticlimactic. Here Jesus has been talking about the end of the world and the last judgment and the upheaval of nations. And at the end of this long speech, as the disciples are surely wondering what they have to do to make sure they are not among the cursed to whom the Lord will say, “Depart from Me into the eternal fire,” Jesus tells them that they should be performing basic works of charity and mercy. These are all good works commanded in the Torah; we could think of them as an expansion of the command to love your neighbor as yourself. They are important to be sure, but they are nothing new.

Yes, Jesus does add, “as you did it to one of these the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” There is a world of theology in that phrase! Jesus identifies with the lowliest wretches and raises the dignity of every human being to divine status. But today, that is not what I find most striking about this passage. What is striking to me today is how utterly innocent the righteous in this scenario are of their own good deeds! They are not even aware that they have been doing anything special. They have just been carrying on, living the way the Lord taught them to live, loving God and neighbor.

I have a confession to make about this passage. I am always convicted by this passage. I seem to always find myself making a mental list when I read it. “I was hungry and you gave me food.” Okay, I donate to the food pantry; that has to count for something. “I was naked and you clothed me.” I sponsor a couple of children in Uganda; does that count? “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Hmm, maybe that means I still have to wrestle with my position about the mass migration of refugees. “I was in prison and you came to me.” Gosh, I keep meaning to research a prison ministry I can support. As though this were a checklist and as long as I can make a tick for every box, I can be assured I’m one of the good ones! Then I catch myself bargaining with God and I’m ashamed.

Now, I don’t want to imply that we shouldn’t search out ways to be more intentionally charitable. God was kind enough to give us explicit instructions in His Word about His expectations for us, and we had better be paying attention! I have no doubt that Matthew 25 is as good a guide to how to live like a true Christian when it comes to our obligations to other people as we could hope for. But this passage here is not a righteous to-do list, and it’s not a how-to-get-to-heaven manual. The most important point about the good deeds that these righteous sheep have been doing is that they have been doing them with a sort of holy self-forgetfulness. It was so natural for them to act this way that they did it without self-interested calculation and without explicit prompting.

There’s only one way to bear spiritual fruit like this, and it’s not by following a checklist and tallying up your good works. You can’t just tick off a few boxes; you have to *be* a disciple. You have to be so steeped in a life of faith and following Jesus that this sort of ethical behavior starts to come automatically. If you have to ask what you can do to improve your

standing on the last day, you're missing the point. If you are anxious about the Day of Judgment or about times of tribulation, you are focusing on the wrong thing. But if you are following Jesus and you have your eyes on Him, everything else will fall into place.

Jesus has spent the last two chapters of Matthew warning about spiritual complacency. Do not put off a life of discipleship; do not put off seeking deeper faith and greater spiritual maturity. Do not find yourself thinking, at the end of your life or worse, at the beginning of eternity, if only I had put my trust in Jesus and followed Him. But the point of this discourse is not to scare us. Jesus even says at the beginning of this speech, "See that you are not alarmed."

The point is to encourage us to keep calm and carry on. Jesus has given us everything we need; He has given us Word and Sacrament, He has given us the Church to nurture us, and He has promised to bear our burdens and hear our prayers. We can rely on Jesus even when tribulations are at their worst, when the world seems to be falling apart. When everything else is uncertain, Jesus is sure and true.

So maybe "keep calm and carry on" can be our motto too, with some tweaking of course! I'm certainly not the first to Christianize this slogan; you could probably find all these variations right now on amazon.com already printed on a mug. But how about, keep calm and pray on? Keep calm and trust God? Keep calm and read the Bible? Keep calm and follow Jesus?

Keeping calm may seem like a luxury to some, or even an impossibility given the state of the world, but for those of us who trust Jesus, that kind of peace is possible. It is the peace of knowing Who is Lord and being able to carry on knowing that He is in charge, that He is Master of the cosmos and Master of our souls.

That, in the end, is what a life of discipleship looks like. Giving oneself over to Jesus. Finding joy, forgiveness, purpose and direction in Him. It is a life of self-forgetful service to others. It is a life of deep peace in a world of chaos and sorrow. It is a regular, everyday sort of life in which we aim to carry on as best we can, doing whatever good we can, with our eyes on the Lord. The work of transformation is behind the scenes and it belongs to Jesus. We are simply to keep our focus on Him and on

aiming to keep His Word and to love our neighbor as He commanded.
That is how we will be prepared to meet our King, to Whom belongs the
glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.