

Life Sunday 2024

Mark 1:13-20 "Just As ... IAM"

Rev. Michael W. Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans For Life

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Warning! Danger! This is an emergency. Alarm is screeching. Gas is leaking. Water's rising. Fire's advancing. Tornado's approaching. Don't wait. Don't waver. Ask questions later. Don't shut the windows. Don't worry about the lights. Don't lock the door. Act fast. Don't look back. Don't grab anything. Forget the phone. Leave the valuables. Get up. Get out. In your jammies if you have to, underwear or even naked. Just go. And hurry!

Only Jonah says it like this: "Forty days, and Nineveh is overthrown!" Paul pronounces it this way: "Appointed time has grown very short. This world in present form is passing away!" And Jesus just goes, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Immediately, immediately!" Focus on city of Nineveh, in the deserts and mountains, with temples and palaces. Cut to kingdom of Judea, in Galilee and Palestine, with valleys and fields. Pan over imperial Corinth, amid Romans and Greeks, with seaside shrines.

A reaping is coming. The reckoning's commencing. Lightning flashes and thunder crashes. Earthquakes and hurricanes are rearing up. Hailstorms and hellfires are roaring forth. Famines bulldoze and floods steamroll. Planetary disaster upends summits. Cosmic catastrophe displaces islands. Abyss bursts open and beasts awaken, locust hordes swarm and rivers run red. Firmament peels back like a scroll, sun black as sackcloth and moon become blood. Heavenly bodies wobble out of orbit, and stars plummet from the sky. Behold the horsemen of apocalypse and elements melting, pelted by brimstone.

Human preferences have pressed the perimeters. But forces bigger than them will contract with resolve. Human performances have flexed the fences. But fundamentals firmer than that are about to condense with vengeance. Human pursuit of pleasure has stretched the constraints. But principles deeper than the immediate pandemonium are going to consolidate for

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judgment. Human worship of power has tensed the tolerances. But realities greater than this arrogant mayhem are starting to tighten up for recompense. Human pride has bent the borderlines. But laws older than the violent moment can't help but straighten out for correction. Critical mass has accumulated. Heaven is getting ready to exhale. Almighty God is hollering, "Enough!"

Surprise pregnancy can come like this kind of emergency. Terminal diagnosis can cause this kind of anxiety. The abject panic, the existential dread threatens to drive us right out of our minds, or at least out of our right minds. Why else would we even consider something so otherwise reprehensible as intentionally ending life? I might not survive this. The humiliation will annihilate me. I stand to lose my very self. The options and escapes have run out. I have to kill or be killed. Abandon even the comforts, they'll only weigh me down. Drop even the camouflages, they'll just hold me back. Dump even the cloaks, they'll block the outs. Ditch even the coverings, they'll cost my life.

Drastic times call for drastic measures, right? But even abortion isn't drastic enough. Even embryocide or euthanasia physician-assisted isn't dire enough. The emergency that jeopardizes these circumstances exceeds physical discomfort and financial turmoil. The crisis that endangers our people eclipses psychological dysfunction and social tribulation, limited resources and infringing upon liberties. The cataclysm that imperils us all looms larger than even primitive Ninevite savagery, Roman colonialism, Corinthian decadence, and Jewish condescension. It's not just childbearing or disease that perpetrates the real wreckage. No, the primary predicament, the critical glitch, has hardwired itself into our nature and DNA. Selfishness. The competition impulse. Survival of the fittest. The zero-sum formula for

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advancement only at another's expense. Sin. Day in, day out evil-doing. Lifetimes of iniquity.

Generations of deceiving and defrauding. Centuries of resenting and begrudging. Ages of slandering and disobeying sovereign God.

And He's coming. He's coming for each and every one of us. He will have you, toe to toe, head to head, face to face, eye to eye. It will demand ransom. It will require restitution. The counterfeit prettiness, property, and popularity that euthanasia acquires will not suffice. The imitation pleasure, power, and pride abortion allows will not avail. Emergency will divest us all of all that as well. That's how emergency works. Can't grab anything. Can't go back. Desert your belongings. Leave even the valuables. The only way out is through, and the only way ahead is naked.

So God comes naked. God Himself comes stripped down. The great I AM gets involved, no adjectives, no predicates. With the emergency so intense, God personally intervenes as never before. He dispenses with His privilege. He relinquishes His extravagance. He sheds His majesty and enters our emergency. God draws near and meets us square where we are, the mortals, the creatures, the sinners. He breathes and He bleeds same as we do, the don't-belongs, the not-wells. He sits and suffers alongside just how we must, working, hurting, and disturbed.

Jesus the gestating embryo reaches us. Jesus the frail fetus and flailing infant reaches us with bare grace and patience. Jesus the manger baby greets us. Jesus the nursing newborn greets us with sheer acceptance and blessing. Jesus the ordinary boy encounters us. Jesus the awkward adolescent and simple peasant encounters us with pure love and devotion. Jesus the humble, gentle drifter embraces us. Jesus the regular, mediocre everyman and common, normal nobody embraces us every one with undiluted dignity and unadulterated sanctity.

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And this God Jesus, He intrudes. This God Jesus, He invades. This God Jesus, He runs naked toward the emergency. This God of ours, Jesus, He throws Himself headlong into the disaster we brought upon ourselves. This God of ours, Jesus, He plunges face-first into our catastrophe and takes on not just our crisis but its root cause, all human sinfulness. This Lord of ours, Jesus, holds nothing back to supply the sacrifice and to render the payment and to endure the punishment and to satisfy the wrath. This Savior of ours, Jesus, offers self and life in entirety and to settle the accounts and to retire the debt and to balance the equation and to atone and amend.

He takes us just as we are. He makes us just as the I AM. His unshielded substitution justifies our survival and salvation, no matter how unqualified or inadequate. His stark naked crucifixion cinches the ruptures and stitches the fissures, no matter how unable or unattractive. His defenseless forgiveness bridges the rifts, heals the breaches, and relieves the emergencies, no matter how feeble or obsolete you and I--or any of us--may be and indeed are.

You see, naked doesn't only mean death. Naked also embodies birth. We leave this life disrobed, but we enter existence unclothed as well. Jesus has made emergency the occasion for ending and for commencing. Emergent indicates coming forth. Crucifixion generates resurrection. Forgiveness fathers forevermore. Atonement births everlasting life. The slain Lamb stands raised again. The same One ascended the throne of ultimate authority to embezzle death and vacate graves everywhere. The plane goes down, but the pilot gets the passengers out and the pilgrimage goes on. The ship may sink, but the skipper recovers the sailors and the pilgrimage continues. Let those who are dying believe and behave as though they are also arising again. The power, the pride, the pleasure, the prettiness, the property, and the popularity, they never really

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mattered. The fellowship, the family, the kingdom, the community, the hearts and histories connected together, the lives bound one to another, these endure and outlast even the emergencies.

Now about that alarm still sounding: no need to panic. Proceed ahead in an orderly fashion. We'll go through this and get out together. Jesus has prepared us for emergency. Recognize the genuine menace as me-versus-you. Perk your ears to the voice of the One who's been here before, who knows the way across, who shows the route out the other side. Fix your eyes on the end destination. Don't look down or turn aside to the left-hand or right-hand distractions. Let go of whatever your fingers instinctively clutch. Empty both hands to grab not somethings but someones, a neighbor in each one, a human chain of others and fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers.

Call it the sanctity of life. Baptism has quenched the flames and fireproofed humankind into Christ. Communion has stocked us for the storm and fed us through the famine and armored us against any earthquakes. Let daily bread serve assurance of unending breath. And faith will float us along, head above water, just as we are, even in darkness and even naked. Trust the Just One, the I AM become just as us, who makes us just as He is. Emergencies don't just build character, they build community. Proclaim and put this into practice. No better occasion for courage occurs than surprise pregnancy. No better opportunity for compassion happens than terminal diagnosis. Change a heart, save a life, just as I AM.