

Sermon — 11/21/21
(Last Sunday of the Church Year)

Text — Mark 13:24-37 and Psalm 39:4 (Introit of the Day)

“O Lord, make me to know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!”

Theme — “Fleeting”

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

I am constantly being reminded of my advancing age. For instance, lately, I have been getting lots of mailings — from our Concordia Benefit Plans and from other sources — all telling me that it is time to get ready for retirement. When I came here as vicar in 1991, Pastor Anderson was an “old” pastor (or so I thought) — but I am as old now as he was then. For that matter, I am only about three years shy of my grandfather’s age when he died. And when I saw my doctor recently, he advised me to quit smoking pipes and then he asked how long I had been smoking pipes and cigars — and I told him (truthfully!) that I was smoking before he was *born*.

No, I am NOT ancient. I am “only” 60 years old. Lots of you have seniority over me. I can expect (statistically speaking) to have another 20 years, or so, to live. But that is only statistically speaking. In point of fact, who really knows? I could drop dead right now of a heart attack. Or I could live another 30 or even 40 years (and wouldn’t THAT surprise Lisa?). It is all up to God. However, the increased aches and pains, the more frequent memory lapses, the growing lack of energy, the face I see in the mirror — they all remind me that the end IS getting closer. As it is for each of us. Because, the truth be told, every day we **all** get one day closer to death. Our time here is indeed fleeting, as the psalmist wrote in our text.

And that fleeting nature of existence here is not just true for us as individuals but it is also true for the Church. Today is the Last Sunday of the Church Year, a time for us to reflect upon that fleeting nature of this world, and our time in it. To ponder what it means. For us personally, but also for the Church in this world. (pause)

Let's start with what it means for us as individuals. Life is fleeting, the psalmist said. And, most of the time, that makes us sad. Because this life is often good. VERY good. Truly, God *has* blessed us with so much. And this world/life are all that we know. So, who really wants it to end? But, let's be honest. This world, this life, are often also NOT good. There is all kinds of suffering and pain. Unhappiness and sorrow and disappointment. Frustration and despair. For all sorts of reasons. You can name them, as easily as can I: sickness and disease, crime and violence, bigotry and hatred, warfare and oppression, natural disasters and man-made ones. But the bottom line — in every case — is sin.

This world (and our lives in it) are NOT the way God intended, nor the way He created. Go back to those first couple of chapters in Genesis and see. God made everything perfect. There were no snowstorms and hurricanes. No earthquakes and famines. No wars or bloodshed. All was literally perfect. But, is *that* the world we know? Of course not. Because of sin. And there is nothing we can do to change that. Mixed in with all the good, we find even more and greater and stronger evil. Because Adam — and we — have let Satan in.

You all remember what happened then. God cursed Adam and Eve — and all their descendants. He cursed Satan. But, even more importantly, God also promised a Savior. One who would come to crush Satan's poisonous head underfoot. And then God exiled Adam and Eve from the Garden. He placed an angel with a flaming sword at its gates, to prevent anyone from entering and eating of the Tree of Life, and thus living forever.

Now, when I was young, that always struck me as part of the curse. Part of the punishment for their sin. They could not get back into Eden. They could not eat of the Tree of Life. Mean, old God! But it was only later that I came to realize that God was being good and gracious and loving to Adam and Eve — and to their descendants — by preventing re-entry into Eden, by cutting off the Tree of Life from them at that time. For if they had gotten in and eaten of that tree, then they WOULD have lived forever. But forever in that fallen state! Forever in that cursed world where Satan roamed free and called the shots. Forever cut off from what God wanted them to have: perfection.

And it is the same for us. It is common for us to lament the shortness of our time here. To wistfully sigh and wish we could live on and on in this world. After all, as I said, there IS much good here — because God is so gracious that He has not taken ALL His gifts from us in our sin. But God does not want us to limp along, in these weak and frail and failing bodies, in this fallen and decadent and dying world. He does not want us to have just SOME of the joys, but He wants us to have ALL of them. And that cannot be in this world.

Yes, life IS fleeting. But that is, in a weird way, good. Because it enables us to move from this imperfect and sinful world to the perfect Eden God always intended for us, His dear children. Now, I am NOT saying that we should look at death as a good thing. As something we should rush toward. As something we court and invite. But I am saying that God takes the devil's strongest weapon — and He turns it against Satan! He takes the sting out of death by taking it for us — and conquering it! On the cross and in the empty tomb, Jesus did just that. And so, death is not something for us to fear. It is NOT the end, but only the beginning. The beginning of true and eternal life. As God wants us to have it. To be freed of sin. To be beyond Satan's reach. To burst the grave, as did our Lord on Easter morning. To know God face-to-face. To be forever gathered around His throne, with our brothers and sisters and the whole heavenly host. To laugh and rejoice forever at His eternal banqueting table. To have that new

heaven and earth He promises, at the end of time. To receive back all — and then some! — of what Adam threw away. And it will never — it CAN never — be taken away from us!

And that promise changes how we view death. And how we live. Our hymnals have a section for “Evening Hymns” — and the interesting thing is that many, if not most, of these hymns also fit in the “Death and Resurrection” section too. As the Bible reminds us, over and over and over again, for the believer, death is but a sleep. And we WILL awake, to everlasting life. And so, as one of my favorite night-time hymns puts:

Teach me to live that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed.
Teach me to die that so I may
Rise glorious at the awesome day.

Yes, death is hard. And we do NOT like it. We resist it and fight it. Much like little children struggle against going to bed at night. They want to stay up and enjoy themselves. But, as parents, you know it is better — even necessary — for them to sleep. So, too, our Lord — in His goodness — knows we need to sleep in death so that we might rise to newness of life. Eternally with Him in the resurrection. This life is fleeting, but THAT life is not! (pause)

Enough for now about what the fleeting and transitory nature of this life means for us as individuals. What does it mean for us as the Church, the Body of Christ? Well, it brings to mind Jesus’ parable from our Gospel lesson, when He said:

It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Of course, WE are those servants. And we have each been given certain tasks to do in the Lord’s household. Some of us are professional church workers — and so, I am to preach and teach, to baptize and commune, absolve and forgive; others are to teach children, or lead our music, or assist in other ways in bringing the Gospel to our members — and especially to those who are not yet members of that

household of faith. I think that much is pretty clear to everyone. But Jesus is not just talking to pastors and teachers, missionaries and deaconesses, and the like. He is talking to ALL of us. And we all DO have a job to do, a place and purpose and function and role in the Church.

We have board members, ushers, Sunday School teachers, altar guild members, youth group leaders, choir members, women's groups and more. Each of those groups — and their leaders and members — have work to do for the Kingdom. But it doesn't stop there! Each of us is called to participate and serve in the Church as we can. By our prayers and offerings. By a kind word or smile. By encouraging others. By inviting and welcoming visitors. By joining in worship and Bible study. For we are all members of that Body of Christ, the Church.

And yet, even THAT does not exhaust the “assigned tasks” we've been given. You are parents and children. Workers and students. Neighbors and friends. Citizens and subjects. In every relationship — literally every single one of them — given us by God, we are tasked with sharing His Word and love. By what we say, by what we do, by how we do it. YOU are God's witnesses to the world. When others see (or hear) you, they see (and hear) God. At least, that is what God has called us to do.

And why? Because without that Good News of Christ Jesus — crucified and risen for our salvation — without that Gospel, there is no hope. No life. Just this temporary, fleeting bit of time here in a fallen world, and then an eternity of darkness and loss, cut off forever from God's love and goodness. And we don't want that for anyone. Not any more than does our Savior, who lived/died/rose again for those people, just as He did for you. And so, we are watchful. We are wide-awake servants, who do their assigned tasks to the best of their ability. Always trusting that through us, GOD works. We are to plant that Gospel seed, but He is the One — the only One — who can make it grow. (pause)

Today is the Last Sunday of the Church Year. A time for us to reflect on the fleeting nature of this world and life. And we would not be human if that realization did not fill us with a touch of sadness and grief. But, knowing what God has in store for us — an eternity of joy and bliss and peace and perfection, a new heaven and earth like unto Eden itself, and a place in our Father's family forever — filled with that knowledge and hope and joy, we look forward. And, in the meantime, we do what God has given us to do as servants in His household.

Yes, today we ARE one day closer to death. But we are also one day closer to heaven! And that makes all the difference. Because Jesus has made the all the difference. For us. And for all people. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Nicene Creed

FE — Offertory/Offering