A sermon preached by Miss Leah Romanelli, Director of Youth Ministries
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“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes,
and in various places famines and plagues…” Luke 21:10-11

Friends, I’m not trying to be flippant when I say this, but the gospel sounds a little too much like
the news today for my comfort: Kurdish fighters attacked by Turkey, Venice under water, Ukraine unstable, impeachment hearings—the wildfires in California aren’t even really making headlines, anymore. South Sudan has been in a state of famine since 2017. And we’ve had another school shooting. None of us are surprised by any of this. Just grief-stricken.

Add this to the litany of daily crises and inconveniences—from sick parents to pets who need surgery, to raising teenagers and everything that goes along with that. Housework and homework that doesn’t get done. Relationships that dissolve. Meetings we missed. Meals we skipped. Times we double-booked ourselves. It’s all too much.

I found myself saying that phrase over and over this past month: it’s all too much. In my work as your Director of Youth Ministries, my job is kind of half-camp counselor and half-that extra member of your family you didn’t know you wanted. That position gives me the privilege of being part of your lives and listening to your worries, and let me tell you—we all need a hug and a vacation. None of us deserve to be holding the amount of heavy things we’re holding right now. It’s all too much.
The other day, I found myself reciting a litany of complaints to my friend. The state of the world weighed on me, I was disagreeing with my family about what to do for Thanksgiving, I was stressed about work and school, and one friend in particular was using way more of my emotional energy than I had planned on giving her. I was in the middle of my long, but valid list when my friend stopped me and asked, “What is the redemptive act, here?”

The question hit me like a bucket of cold water. I had been strategizing what I could say that would be effective, but safe. “What is the redemptive act, here?”

It took me a few minutes to figure out what she meant. But in the simplest terms, she was asking me what I could do in the situation to give the other person grace and help clear a path to growth for them.

To be clear, she wasn’t giving me permission to tell my friend where I thought she was wrong, which, unfortunately, is something I dearly love to do. Because redemptive acts are generous and not controlling. They call us to respond with our best selves. And they require thought and intention. The most beautiful part about redemptive acts is that they free us up from worrying about ourselves—remember, I was trying to figure out what I could say that was “safe” for me—and instead, redemptive acts ask us to think about what’s best for the person in front of us.

We’re lucky that this Gospel is paired with Isaiah, today, because frankly, Luke is not very comforting. He is telling us about the state of the world as it is and how it will be in the future: this mercurial time we’re in that is after Jesus lived, but before his return where things often go so very wrong. Luke says the temple in Jerusalem is about to be destroyed, but Isaiah says God is about to build a whole new Jerusalem as joy, and its people a delight. We’re not
talking about an earthly Jerusalem in a war-torn Middle East, here. We’re talking about a metaphorical and yet more real than the breath in my body Jerusalem that is the kingdom of God. There will be no weeping and no distress. We will plant vineyards and eat from them. No one will force us out of our houses. There will be no more school shootings. Our children will get to live out their whole lives. Everyone will have enough to eat and we won’t even need a government anymore. But here’s the surprise twist: this kingdom of God in Isaiah is also the world as it is now and how it will be in the future. Now and not yet. There are glimpses of it everywhere in our everyday redemptive acts, my friends. We just get so overwhelmed that it’s hard to see them. They also don’t make the headlines very often. So let’s think of a few:

Last Wednesday was Fred Rogers Day. Seventeen years after the last episode of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood aired, millions of people across the world wore “cardigans for kindness” in memory of Fred and with a promise to devote their lives to grace, acceptance, and the sanctity of childhood—that is a redemptive act.

Three years ago, Dallas resident B.B. McGowan was homeless and lost in his alcoholism. Oak Lawn United Methodist Church helped him on the road to recovery and to secure housing and employment. Today, B.B. spends his evenings driving around in the church van, looking for people who need a meal and bed and a helping hand. That is a redemptive act.

One of our youth recently told me that church is the only place where he can just be himself. That is all of us, together, participating in a redemptive act.

One of my favorite books of all time is The Last Battle. It’s the final installment in the Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. In this fantasy of talking animals and a lion named Aslan that represents Jesus, there is a final battle between good and evil and the world ends.
Much like the time Luke is talking about, today. As your youth director, a job that comes with a heavy dose of whimsy, I’m going to take the liberty of sharing a quote with you from a unicorn in this story. To set the stage, the cast of characters watch the world die and the sun be unmade. Then a door appears, and they walk through it. The friends bicker for a few minutes about where they could possibly be when reality starts to dawn.

“Those hills,” said Lucy, “…aren’t they very like the southern border of Narnia?…And yet they’re not like. They’re more…more…oh, I don’t know….”

“More like the real thing,” said the Lord Diggory softly.

Suddenly Farsight the Eagle spread his wings, soared thirty or forty feet up into the air…

“Kings and Queens,” he cried, “we have all been blind. We are only beginning to see where we are…From up there I have seen it all—Narnia is not dead. This is Narnia.”

“But how can it be?” said Peter. “For Aslan told us…that we should never return to Narnia, and here we are.”

“The Eagle is right,” said the Lord Diggory. “When Aslan said you could never go back to Narnia, he meant the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia…”

It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right hoof on the ground, then cried: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this…Come farther up, come farther in!”
Friends, please hear me when I say that I am not suggesting that we focus on the good things and ignore the bad ones. The bad things in life desperately need our attention, prayers, love, and action. But the only way to make it through the hard ones with our souls intact is to look for and participate in the redemptive acts that create an in-breaking of the kingdom of God. The reason we love the world is because it sometimes looks like the kingdom of God. Those redemptive acts are glimpses of what the world is supposed to be like. Glimpses of hope. Luke tells us that “by our endurance we will gain our souls.” This is how we endure—in hope. Hope that we have in our Redeemer, and hope that we build with our own two hands when we participate in the work of God.

As Jeanne said a few weeks ago in her sermon, “We all want to be good people, but that is not enough.” We have to take the focus off of ourselves and be on the lookout for times when we can bid grace where there is none. Peace where there is none. Love where there is none. That is the power of the Holy Spirit in each of us. That is how we respond to the overwhelming heaviness that daily life can lay on us. And when we are drained and tired and overwhelmed, we turn to the people who restore us—we return to this church family, who so intentionally lives the Gospel together—for peace and strength and community, so that we can go back out into the world with open hearts and souls intact.

Friends, I invite you to join me, as we move into Advent and a time of waiting and anticipation, in looking for the kingdom of God poking through the ordinary. And to participate, whenever we possibly can, in creating redemptive moments that open the door to more grace, more generosity, more honesty, more justice, and more God-with-us.

Come farther up. Come farther in.
The kingdom of God is waiting and we have work to do.