Dear friends in Christ, Grace and peace to you in the name of God, our Creator, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

There are many different voices coming through the texts for today. We have the voice in Amos telling us that justice is coming and it’s going to be awful. We have the voice in the Psalm saying, please God, bring about justice! We have the voice from 1st Thessalonians saying that we will be raised and that we can take comfort in that, and finally we have the voice in Matthew which tells us to be prepared or to be prepared to lose.

These texts seem to all want to make their voices heard in the midst of all of the mystery which surrounds death—a reality which we took a look at last week as we observed All Saints. We don’t know much about death, or what happens to us after we die. We, as Christians, have hope in the resurrection of the dead, and of the eternal life which has been won for us through the sacrifice of Jesus, but beyond that, we aren’t sure of what that will look like. Death and what happens after death are mysteries which we wrestle with in the midst of our daily lives: death of a loved one who was ready to go, death of a child who wasn’t with us long enough, death is a mystery and death, is never a friend.

Our Gospel text for today is a parable in which Jesus offers us a glimpse into the Kingdom of God, and it attempts to give us resolve in the mysteries surrounding death, but as parables often are, this parable is unsettling, and can leave us more uncomfortable with the idea of God’s Kingdom, than we were before. It can leave us fearful about whether or not we are adequately prepared for the coming of Christ. And the voices we have heard today from Amos, David, and Paul don’t provide the clarification we might seek either.

Amos was probably not talking about the second coming, instead, the context was likely a festival of the new year which was approaching and the desire of the people in this community to have Christ bless them as they close out one year and begin another. What was on the line here for Amos was frivolous festivals that were more about human need that divine praise. The sacrifices, the festivals, and the worship that the people were presuming to be for God, was not done in the right mindset. We can sometimes too become more caught up in what we are doing rather than why we are doing it, or who it is that we are doing it for, ultimately, for God.

In the psalm we read for today, David is pleading with God to bring justice to his enemies. Though these enemies were likely political or foreign rivals, there is a tone about this psalm that suggests that the underlying enemy is death. But despite the enemies that David is facing in this psalm, David is recalling the promises of God and God’s action as already experienced throughout human history and in our own lives. We must never forget that God always wins.

In the writings of Paul, seen in the 1st Thessalonians reading for today, we hear about the hope of the resurrection. But the underlying issue which Paul is responding to is that of death itself. It is probable that those who were being addressed in Paul’s original context held the misconception, that baptism made one immune from death and thus the problem that Paul is addressing is that Christians have died at all. People had lost faith in the hope of the resurrection because it hadn’t followed through in the way in which they had expected.

Last week on All Saints Sunday we lit candles as a way of honoring the memory of those who have gone before us. We specifically remember those who have passed away within the past year, but we also are compelled to think of those who have been gone longer. Those who have lost someone whom they have loved can attest to the idea that those we have lost are never far from our thoughts and our hearts. It doesn’t matter if it was a death which was at the end of a long life well lived or the abrupt conclusion of a life which had only just begun, those whom we remember are with us in our hearts and minds.

Not all of the thoughts we have of those who have passed away are comforting thoughts. I had a woman ask me if her parents were in Heaven because they hadn’t received communion towards the end of their lives. We hear a parable like the one in Matthew this morning, and we can’t help but wonder, not only about our own preparation for the coming of Christ, but that of those who we have loved and are no longer with us. We may not always be prepared, not for death, not for our own, and not for those who we care about. Death is a separation, a painful one, and no matter how temporary we believe that death may be, it still stings.

Martin Luther is credited with saying, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” Our preparation for the end of the world is actually done in living our lives today in the way in which we have been called through the scriptures. If our purpose in life is simply to go to heaven, then our lives here on earth are empty, but Jesus came that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Life is lived in community, living, loving and serving one another.

With the second coming of Christ there is fear, there is apprehension, but there is also hope because through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the promise is that even with the end of the world, life goes on, and in fact, life begins. The end of the world isn’t the end of life, it is the beginning of life. And so, in our preparation for the bridegroom, we should care for one another, care for all of creation, knowing that these are the gifts given to us today.

We have faith in our baptism, we have faith in the gifts of communion, and we have faith in the promises of the gospel, we are free to serve God with open and loving hearts, not out of fear but in love, and in response to the love which has been given to us because everything else has already been taken care of. We need not fear the return of Jesus Christ, but celebrate the life he has given to each of us, and the new life he has promised us. In preparation for the eternal life which has been won for us, we need only to live lives in response to the great gift that we have been given. Preparing for the Kingdom of Heaven is not about telling people how to live their lives, but rather caring for others as our family in Christ.

There are many voices around us today, conflicting voices, telling us that we aren’t good enough, telling us that we are better than *those* people, telling us that our faith is foolish, and telling us that we don’t have enough faith. We have voices telling us that death is the end of everything and so we should just live for today. We have voices telling us that since we have life eternal, we need not worry about what we do in our lives here on earth or how we care for the creation we have been given. We have all kinds of voices surrounding us, demanding our attention, sometimes well-meaning, many out of deep conviction, but only one voice truly matters, the voice of God. God liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In baptism, by water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church, the body of Christ. As we live and grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God. We need not fear the coming of Christ, we need not fear the justice that is to come, we need not fear the God who loves us. Because, God loves us, and out of this love, the lives that we live in grateful response to God will be the preparation needed for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.