

Do you ever look around at this crazy, tumultuous world and worry about the future?

Silly question right? We here at St. Paul's pride ourselves on never worrying about anything, right?

Since I know you guys have that whole worrying thing under control, I'm not worried at all that the stats I'm about to share will worry you... I know they are not exactly heart-warming, but you guys aren't worriers, so you should be ok.

Ready? A few stats about our church, our church body, and Christianity in America as a whole.

Let's start big picture: Christianity in America (maybe you've heard some of these before):

More people than ever before want nothing to do with religion in general, especially Christianity. In my generation, the Millennials (which is the biggest generation in our country), four out of every ten people want nothing to do with church. That is twice as many as the Baby Boomers, just two generations earlier.

That's the first stat, stat #2: even among those who claim to be Christian, there is a shocking amount of apathy. Recent studies have found that while 40% of Americans claim they go to church on a regular basis, only about 20% actually do. Meaning, 4 out of every 5 people in our country would rather say at home on Sunday morning.

And that's just the tip of the statistical iceberg, but let's move from big to medium: a few stats about the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, our church body, the WELS...

The reality is that virtually all Christian church bodies in America are in statistical decline. WELS is no exception.

From our high in 1990 our church body has shrunk by 14% in the last 27 years. That is around 60,000 less people who are hearing the pure, unadulterated word of God from our churches.

What is extra troubling is that the rate of decline is growing. In the 90's we lost around .3% per year. Last year alone the decline was 1.4%.

One of the most troubling stats is our ongoing struggle to keep young people in the church. If this next generation follows the trend, half of the kids in this congregation, by the time they graduate college, will no longer be WELS. Let that one sink in... 50% of kids in our church body are no longer WELS by the time they graduate college.

Finally, if you've been here at St. Paul's for a decade or more, I don't need to give you numbers. You've watched it happen. In the number of kids in the school and people in the pews, St. Paul's has not proven immune to the statistical decline of Christianity in America.

Friends, we as a church body, as a congregation, as individuals need to face a statistical fact: we are entering a new era in American history – the post-Christian era.

I told you, not exactly heart-warming... but that doesn't worry you, right?

500 years ago that reformer with the goofy haircut, Martin Luther, compared God's word and grace to a passing downpour. If you look at history, the history of the

Bible and the history since the Bible, God's word and grace have been poured out on specific people and locations around the world at different times. Wherever that downpour was happening Christianity flourished for a while, but that downpour never lasted for long. For a whole host of reasons (all of them having to do with the stubborn sinfulness of the human heart), that downpour has always moved on.

Think about it... Maybe your church history is a little fuzzy, but walk through the broad timeline with me. Watch God's rain shower move.

First, you have the Israelites. They were God's chosen people hand-picked by God – the recipients of the downpour of God's word and grace. But how many Christians are there in Israel today? Not many. Because of hard hearts, the downpour moved on.

Next, you can read in Acts, and the very early history of the Christian church how the Christian church exploded in modern day Turkey, Greece, and Northern Africa, in places like Antioch, Corinth, Constantinople, and Alexandria. But how many Christians are there in Turkey and Egypt today? Not many. Because of hard hearts, the downpour moved on.

Rome and the rest of Europe were next. The downpour of God's word and grace changed the religious and political landscape of Europe for centuries. But how many Christians are there in Europe today? The grand churches of Europe, built centuries ago, sit mostly empty on a weekly basis.

From there the Gospel shower moved to America. For centuries now, this continent has been a place where God's word and grace were cherished by the majority of its residents. But the stats are telling. Religious apathy and hard hearts are growing. The downpour is moving on.

Where is it moving next? Well, you should see some of the stats about Christianity's growth in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia – Christianity is exploding which is great for those parts of the world where so many people need to know about Jesus, but what about us? If God's gospel rain shower is indeed moving on, where does that leave us – as Americans, as WELSers, as members of St. Paul's?

You guys aren't worrying yet, are you?

Friends, it would be perfectly understandable, even expected if you would look at the state of Christianity in America today, at our church body, at our congregation and get a little worried and scared about what the future will hold for you, for your kids.

What are we going to do? Shrinking numbers mean shrinking offerings which means it is harder to keep the lights on and the staff paid. How can we carry out gospel ministry when we can't afford it?

How can we fulfill the great commission, how can we go and make disciples of all nations when four out of every ten people you talk to want nothing to do with Jesus?

Parents, look at your kids, do you want to be the one to pick which ones stay faithful to God's Word and which ones don't?

And even for those of us who do remain faithful to God's word: one of the clear lessons we can learn from history is that after the gospel shower moves on, persecution almost always comes next. What is it going to be like to be a Christian in post-Christian

America? Jesus promised that if they persecuted him, they would persecute his followers. We've had a nice long, safe run with Christianity in America. If that is indeed going away, when will the persecution start? Your lifetime? Your kid's?

And then what needs to be the most important question: As it becomes harder and harder to be a Christian in America, will you remain faithful? Will you, are you standing firm, letting your light shine, come what may, or will you, or are you already buckling under the societal pressure to keep your faith to yourself? To walk away from Jesus because following him is just too hard and scary?

Friends, God's word equips us to take a good hard look at our own hearts, right? If stubborn sin in hard hearts is what has caused God to move on in the past, well, is he going to move on from me? I sure see a whole lot of stubbornness in this heart of mine!

I warned you... not exactly heart-warming...

Now, what in the world does all of this have to do with Romans 11?

Well, everything.

You see, Paul, in Romans 11 is writing a letter to people who were experiencing one of those great passing rain shower moments in history. It was the first big transition that I just talked about, God's gospel shower passing from the Israelites to the non-Israelites, from the Jews to the Gentiles.

And that meant it was a scary time.

It was scary for those Jews who had come to faith in Jesus but were watching their friends, their family, their nation as a whole rejecting Jesus. Being a Christian Jew meant believing that your friends, family, and nation, as a whole, was on the way to hell. Was God going to abandon you too, with them?

It was scary for the non-Jews, the Gentiles, watching God abandon his chosen people, the Israelites. Are we going to be next? Was the obvious question... God turned his back on his own people because of their hard hearts. Our hearts are far from perfect. Is he going to do the same to us too?

On top of that, for both the Jews and the Gentiles, this great period of transition was going to bring persecution too.

It was a scary time to be a Christian in Rome 2000 years ago. There were a lot of worrisome statistics.

Which means we, in post-Christian America, find ourselves in a remarkably similar boat, don't we?

Scary times 2000 years ago in Rome, and today – scary because God the shower of God's grace seems to be moving on. You've got your head in the sand if looking at the present and future doesn't bring worrisome questions to mind.

Worrisome especially when we see in ourselves the same traits and sins that caused God to move on from the Jews in the first place.

Paul was writing to people who were worried. And he was writing not to scare them further, but to comfort them. Notice, Paul's instructions to scared Christians was not: "Try harder you guys! You have to figure this out! You have to soften the hearts of

the people around you! You have to soften your own hearts before God moves on from you too!"

No, Paul didn't write about what they had to do. No, in the face of worrisome stats and future he reminded them about grace (one way, undeserved love), not works. He wrote to give comfort – comfort in a very special grace-filled truth, comfort in God's teaching about *election*.

Maybe you're familiar with *election*, maybe you're not. We are not talking about voting someone into office here, we are talking about the Biblical teaching called election, predestination, or foreknowledge.

In short, election is the teaching that before the creation of the world God foreknew **the remnant that would be chosen by grace** (as Paul puts it). Before **"let there be light"** was spoken, out of all the people who would ever live on this earth from the Adam and Eve to the end, God chose, or elected, or predestined some to live with him forever. As Jesus said, **"Many are invited, but few are chosen."**

Now, this teaching of election or predestination, if you've never heard of it before, might get your mind spinning a little bit – that God before the creation of the world knew and chose a relatively small number of people who would end up spending forever with him in heaven – that's hard to wrap your mind around.

If you have heard of election/predestination before maybe you know what a can of worms this teaching has been in the history of the church. It is a teaching that has tripped up quite a few people because it is a teaching of the Bible that does not square with human reason. At the end of the day it is a teaching that can be quite offensive to human reason.

I'd love to study with you guys everything the Bible says about election, but we can't do that in a sermon setting. (But please, if you have questions about it, that is one of the reasons my and Pastor Adam's contact information is in the back of every worship folder!)

For our purposes this morning we will focus on one beautiful truth of election.

Did you know that *every single time* election or predestination is talked about in the Bible it is for the purpose of bringing comfort to worried Christians? Every single time God brings this up through his inspired authors, his intent is to bring comfort to people like us, like those Roman Jews and Gentiles – people who look around at the world and at our own hearts and what we see brings to mind the one scary question Paul brings up at the beginning of Romans 11: Is God rejecting his people? Is God going to reject me? If the rain shower of God's word and grace is indeed moving on, is God going to leave me and my loved ones behind?

God's answer to scared people through Paul: **"By no means... God does not rejected his people – the ones he foreknew** (there it is, election, right?)... **at the present time there is a remnant chosen** (elected, predestined) **by grace."**

As Christians in Rome or America, as you watch the gospel shower move on, you may feel like you are in an ever shrinking minority, just like Elijah felt like he was the only believer left in his day, but what you need to know is that now, just like in

Elijah's day, God's election still stands. No matter how things appear, no matter how scary it may get, **there is a remnant chosen by grace...** and **that remnant is you!**

It turns out that election is exactly what worried, scared people like us need to hear. Think about it.

How did you feel as a kid on the playground picking teams when you were the first one chosen?

How did it feel when you were in high school and you got chosen for the leading role in the play?

How did it feel when you worked your hardest and you got chosen for the new job or the big promotion?

How did it feel when you expressed interest in that pretty girl and she chose to date and marry you?

Even if you never experienced one of those "choosing's" I'm betting you know how much you would have loved it if you had been chosen, and you probably still remember how much it hurt those times when you weren't chosen.

We humans have a deep desire to be chosen – to know that someone picked us out of a crowd and chose to love and honor us.

Friends, that is exactly what the doctrine of election teaches.

Do you want to know how the teaching of election is comforting? The doctrine of election is God looking you in the eye, speaking to your heart through his word, saying, "I chose you."

And the truly beautiful thing about God's election: unlike on the playground, in high school, the workplace, or dating world, God's choice had absolutely nothing to do with you – your earning it, your intrinsic qualities, your performance. Paul makes clear that God choice was by grace – undeserved one way love.

By the faith that Jesus has planted in your heart through the flooding downpour of his word and the sin-drowning waters of baptism, God chose *you!* *You* are the remnant of God. *You* are the elect of God. *You* are one of the ones God foreknew and chose from the beginning of the world.

God chose you!

Though we may very well soon be in the minority and open to rejection and persecution in post-Christian America through the power of God's word that has taught your heart about the ultimate victory Jesus won over sin and this world at his cross, God offers your heart this comfort: You are God's people, you are God's remnant, and God does not forget, or abandon, or reject those he has chosen.

Friends, there is a lot more that can be and should be learned and discussed when we look at the stats of Christianity, the WELS, and St. Paul's. But over and above all of those discussions, in the face of living in this sinful and worrisome world, remember the comfort we have as the remnant of God: by grace, that crazy one way love of Jesus, God has chosen you.

Amen.