

TWENTY FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST - YEAR C – PROPER 28 RCL

November 14, 2010

Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12:2-6 Canticle 9; 2 Thesss. 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19.

St. Matthew's, Chesterfield VA Holy Eucharist

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In the Name of God who creates and redeems and sustains us now, and always. Amen.

When I was at Princeton Seminary I had the very good fortune to study Old Testament from Bernhard W. Anderson, a justifiably famous Biblical scholar who was an absolutely fascinating lecturer and teacher.

For example, Dr. Anderson wrote the introduction and all the footnotes for the first five books of the Old Testament in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Some of you may even know one of his books, *Understanding the Old Testament*, which has been used by theological seminaries and universities everywhere for years as the basic text about the Hebrew Scriptures and is read in translation around the world.

But one thing I always remember about Dr. Anderson was a story he told about himself and his wife when he was still a young graduate student.

I think it was somewhere in Kentucky, and at that time the local news was full of accounts of a small religious sect, very fundamentalist, which had recently declared that the end of the world was coming.

In fact they confidently announced the precise date when it was going to happen.

Of course the press and broadcast news had a field day with daily bulletins and interviews full of their predictions.

When the appointed time was only a week away, the members of the sect gathered together to hole up in a nearby barn, to wait for Jesus and the End of All Things.

It happened to be late spring, and Dr. Anderson and his wife were attending an end-of-the-semester party with the rest of the grad students in his department.

As you can imagine, especially for theological students, the conversation turned to the much-publicized end of the world, now only one week away.

And even though they themselves did not subscribe to the very un-scholarly beliefs of this particular little sect,
nevertheless the grad students asked one another,

“WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU REALLY KNEW THE END
OF THE WORLD WAS ONLY A WEEK AWAY?”

Conversation was very lively.

(I challenge you to think about this yourself over the next few days.)

They all offered opinions, going around in a circle to hear everyone’s ideas.

Some said that they would spend the time in prayer and meditation.

Some said they would read the Bible and other inspirational books.

Some said they would spend time singing hymns and the great songs of faith.

Others said they would go to their favorite place in nature.

And still others said they would contact family and friends to thank them and tell them they loved them.

Then it was Mrs. Anderson’s turn.

“Well,” she said, “If I really knew that the end of the world was coming soon, I would hire a cleaning lady.”

Everyone was startled and waited for her to explain.

“I’ve always wanted to have a cleaning lady to help with the housework,” she said, “but we could never afford something like that.”

“So if I thought the world was coming to an end, I would hire a cleaning lady and tell her I’d pay her at the end of the week!”

We are fascinated by the idea of the end of the world.

We may not talk about it as often or in the same way as some others do,
 but the themes of the end times,
 of the “last things”,
 of judgment and the final coming again of Jesus Christ
 are very definitely a part of Scripture and of Christian belief,
 particularly at this season in the Church Year.

Which is why today our readings too deal with the end of all things...
 they are unquestionably apocalyptic.¹

Apocalyptic writings appear during times of chaos,
 when people have lost hope or are suffering calamities or
 persecutions.

Then they tend to hope for divine intervention or for some sort of miraculous
 restoration for themselves or for their nation.

Suffering people hope for these things, and so do *we*.

They often hope the enemies who have caused this will be punished...
 (Think of 9/11.)

Apocalyptic writing is a kind of underground literature.

It often uses symbols and metaphorical language, and sometimes it appears
 to interpret to “predict” the future.

But what it is really doing is proclaiming a message of hope to the faithful,
 a message they are longing to hear.

Today’s Old Testament reading comes at a time when the people of Israel have
 come back from years of being captives,
 exiled to Babylon for years of suffering,
 only to get back at last to Palestine, their homeland,
 and then to find abominably sinful practices going on there...
 They are shocked and they are thinking,
 “First exile, and now THIS!”

It's just too much. All they have been through...what was it *for*?

But then comes the prophet Isaiah's Good News that we heard in our first reading...

God is "...about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight...
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard...
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the LORD."

They are words of hope...

They assure the people that God is in control of history.

In place of a psalm this morning we read Canticle 9, also from Isaiah:

Surely, it is God who saves me;
I will trust in him and not be afraid.

And "... the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel."

God is in charge, says this song of deliverance and thanksgiving – God is our salvation.

Our third reading from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians raises an interesting issue...

These Christians expected the coming of Jesus – what we sometimes call the *Second Coming* –
but they assumed it would be very soon after Jesus' death.

They expected it, but it had not happened.

So...what did that mean?

Paul uses this letter to explain to them that although we cannot know when the end of all things will come, it is not expected right away.

They and he do not doubt that it will come, but it raises the question,
what are we supposed to do in the meantime?

Good question.

Apparently a few of the Thessalonians had already formed an attitude, namely, why should we work if world is about to come to an end?

What's the point?

Now there is a certain logic here, but the consequence of their, shall we say "non-action",

was that they then were living on the generosity of the others in the community.

Maybe they thought that was "No big deal".

But it had become a problem for the others, and they were irritated – who can blame them?

That's why Paul advised them to "keep away from believers who are living in idleness..." – he calls them "mere busybodies, not doing any work."

He hopes they will be shamed into a conversion of life.

He exhorts them to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

"Brothers and sisters," he says, "do not be weary in doing what is right."

The dilemma for these Christians was, "How are we supposed to live while we wait for the final days?"

How are we supposed to live 'in the meantime'?"

This is exactly our dilemma today.

Elsewhere in the New Testament the end and the fulfillment of human time is described as coming unexpectedly.

Jesus himself says in one place, "You know neither the day nor the hour."

Which always makes me wonder why so many fundamentalist Christians, who believe the Bible must be read literally, nevertheless very often make very specific predictions about the end of time.

In today's Gospel, however, Luke has Jesus advising the disciples that before the end when Jesus will come again,
there will be a period of great tribulation, when the powers of evil will make a final onslaught.

Luke writes, that there will be "dreadful portents and great signs from heaven" – great sorrows of various kinds.

There are references to the persecution of the church by the Jews, the overthrow of Gentile rule, and the punishment of Jerusalem by the Romans – including the destruction of the magnificent Temple.

All these things were happening or had already happened at the time when Luke wrote his Gospel down.

So while it seems as though Jesus is predicting the future for his disciples,
in reality Luke is writing down the story of Jesus to the Christians who were
living a generation or two after Jesus' death,
when many of these things had already happened.

Apocalyptic writing often appears to be predicting the future,
although it actually may be describing things that have already
occurred.

(It's not very hard to predict the future when it has already happened.)

But Luke knows his audience has lived through a time when there have been violent persecutions and many political upheavals.

They have suffered the intense trauma of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman legions.

The magnificent Temple had been the very heart of Judaism, and its loss was absolutely devastating.

Luke knows the people need to be lifted from their legitimate despair to hope, and in the story of Jesus he does just that.

These wars and insurrections and natural disasters are real, he says.

They are milestones on road leading to the end.

But don't confuse what you're living through now with the end.

The signs are there, but end has not yet come.

Yes, there will be persecutions and arrests, "But do not be terrified," Luke has Jesus saying.

Jesus promises them wisdom and the right words to say when have to face their enemies.

He says clearly that some will even be put to death.

But yet right in the middle of these stark and unvarnished descriptions there are also promises...

"Not a hair of your head will perish", Jesus says, and
"By your endurance you will gain your souls."

There is vindication for those who remain faithful,
who are loyal to the very end.

Today's Gospel tells them (and, of course, us) that they and we must be people of hope.

Living in the meantime is not easy.

It was not easy for the people of Isaiah's time, who finally got back to their homeland, only to find it had become a place of chaos and disruption.

It wasn't easy for the people of Thessalonica, who did not know how to carry on and live when the end of the age which they had expected did not come.

It wasn't easy for the early Christians of Luke's time, who had seen some terrible things happen even while there were signs that even more was to come.

All of them needed to hear a message that God is not restricted to the natural courses of human events,
to what we can see now and to those things that we have experienced.

The message is that God can and will act outside history as well as within history.

There is meaning in the suffering of the moment...it has meaning in the overall divine plan.

These Scriptures told them and tell us that there is another world and another age coming that will right the balance of injustice and prove God's power over all evil.

Much of this is mysterious to us, just as it was to the people of the Bible.

I like what my late friend Joe Russell wrote in his book² about the lectionary readings, especially after readings like the ones we had this morning:

“God cannot be tagged and boxed in to what we can rationally figure out...”

After we encounter readings like this, he says, “we are sent back into the world as far more humble...praising the mystery beyond the visible, tangible creation so familiar to us.”

Today's readings remind us that whatever the future, history moves toward a goal determined by God,
whether we can see or understand it or not.

We at St. Matthew's may not be thinking so much about the end of the world these days.

But during this time of parish transition we too are living “in the meantime.”

We don't know what is going to happen.

We know there will be changes,
but we don't know what those changes will be.

The unknown is unsettling,
but it is also somewhat exciting...
and we have all sorts of mixed feelings, sometimes all at once.

We know we cannot predict the future
(although it's amazing how hard we try to do so.)

We too must be people of hope.

Like the Thessalonians, we must continue with our work.

We must be willing to look at new ideas and reexamine old ones.

We must have the courage to look the facts squarely in the face and see things as they are.

We must pray and learn and listen in order to discover what kind of Church St. Matthew's is being called to be in the days ahead.

And if we do these things sincerely and faithfully, I believe that our community will indeed discern God's will for this congregation.

And I believe that the desires of God's heart will be the desires of our hearts as well. Amen.

¹ I owe much of these ideas on apocalyptic literature to my friend, the late Rev. Joseph Parker Russell and his book, *Sharing Our Biblical Story*, pages p. 57-58 and 63.

² Ibid.