

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 18, 2012
Pentecost 25
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Daniel 12:1-13
Psalm 16:5-11
Hebrews 10:31-39
Mark 13:14-23

With the exception of our Psalm, there is a theme which runs through our Scripture lessons today that is vitally important to us.

It begins in Daniel, where Daniel experiences a vision of a time of great suffering to come for God's people, an experience that will refine and purify them.

You may recall that Daniel and his friends had been taken captive by the Babylonians, and because of their faith in the God of Israel, they were persecuted and even sentenced to die by king Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel's vision of a time of great suffering comes at a time when the children of Israel had very little hope.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer writes to Christians who are also suffering for their allegiance to Jesus. They are being persecuted in horrific ways. The persecution is so severe that many are being tempted to turn away from their faith in Jesus.

In Mark's Gospel, Mark warns of a time of suffering and crisis to come, days of great horror and destruction where a "desolating sacrilege" will be standing where it should not be.

So we have three texts, and three images of great suffering in the lives of God's people. They speak to us as the body of Christ at the communal level. They remind us that history as we know it is moving toward its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. And as it does, things may get worse for the body of Christ before they get better. For our God is the God who suffers (i.e, look at Jesus). And the God who suffers saves his people not so much *from* suffering, but *through* suffering.

Now this sounds rather bleak, not like the good and hopeful news you come to church to hear on any given Sunday. But there actually is much Good News in these texts. For the outcome to God's people of their suffering is deliverance, redemption, the receiving of all that God has promised. Daniel puts it this way: "you will rest, and at the end of the days, you will rise again to receive the inheritance set aside for you" (v. 13).

The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: "Do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord, no matter what happens. Remember the great reward it brings you. Patient endurance is what you need now, so you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised" (vv. 35-36).

Whether it was Daniel and his friends, or the Christians in Asia Minor who were enduring suffering, or whether it is us today -- the need for "patient endurance" is same for all of us. I believe that God desires to give us grace, and a

spiritual resolve to help us not only hang tough when things are tough, but to hang “tougher” when things are tough.

Why? *Because this life is not all there is.* As Christians, our lessons remind us this morning that our full reward for following Jesus does not come to us in *this* life. As Jesus said, “in the world you will have tribulation.”

We live in a fallen world where things have gone terribly wrong. Life as we know it is a battleground, not a playground. The forces and powers of evil are real, and their destruction is real. Every inch of ground is being contested, and there are casualties.

As a pastor I'm often asked, "what is this world coming to?"

My answer is always the same: *this world is coming to an end.* That is true whether a Republican or a Democrat wins the White House; it's true regardless of whether the economy is growing or stagnant; it's true in the face of life's tragedies, and it's true in the face of life's great joys and celebrations.

This world is not our final home. We don't live merely with short term tunnel vision, we look at the big picture. We may reside temporarily in Boise or Caldwell or Nampa, but we're looking for a city whose builder and maker is Almighty God, a home in the heavens not made with hands.

We live in a fallen world. But do not be mistaken. God is putting this fallen world right again. And the point of Scripture lessons such as we have today is to

remind us that when we read the back of the book, the message to us there is that in the end, we win! This world went off of its axis a long time ago. But take heart and be of good cheer. Lift up your head, because God is putting the world right.

What is hard for us to hear at times is the fact that because God is One who suffers (in Jesus), the path of his peoples' salvation often leads through suffering. But on the other side of that suffering lies great reward.

This line of thinking has sometimes left Christianity open to the criticism of "pie in the sky" religion. And maybe there is some kernel of truth in the charge. Christians can sometimes be so *heavenly* minded that they are no *earthly* good. But I like how the Apostle Paul weighs in on the subject as he writes to the Corinthians: "For if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world."

The KJV renders it: "if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

As we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I ask you to bow your heads and close your eyes for a moment.

In the quietness of this moment, I want you to think of all the challenges that confront you in your life right now. Things that burden your heart, things that are a source of suffering in your life.

The world in which we live is so busy and moves so quickly that it can tempt us to have tunnel vision, to miss the forest for the trees, to see only our present circumstances. So in the silence of this moment, open your hearts to these words:

“Do not throw away your confident trust in the Lord, no matter what happens. Remember the great reward it brings you! Patiently endure, and continue to do God’s will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.”

As we come to the Table this morning, I remind you that the bread and wine is a down payment to you of this promise. It is a good faith deposit that the full promise is on its way. Your life -- and this world -- are coming to an end. But the bread and wine offered to you today is the promise of a *good* end. Hear that promise today. Receive it gratefully. Then rise up and press ahead by faith.

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