

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 17, 2013
Pentecost 26
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Malachi 13-4:6
Psalm 98:5-10
Ephesians 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

Our Gospel lesson today features a type of writing known as apocalyptic, which comes from the Greek word which means “unveiling,” or “revelation.” In the Bible, apocalyptic writings disclose the supernatural world *beyond* the world of historical events. Writers often mix together events that are currently happening with what is going on *beyond* history. What is going on is placed in the context of what is *really going on*, so that folks can see that when the world looks as though it’s about to end, God’s work is just beginning.

For followers of Jesus in our text, the import of Jesus’ words seems to be that things are going to get worse before they get better. The temple, in all its glory, will be destroyed. Wars and insurrections and natural disasters are going to blight the earth. Famine and disaster will ravage nations and peoples. Persecution of those who follow Jesus will be intense. We would not blame Jesus’ followers here if their response to Jesus at this point would be to throw up their hands in despair:

To give up.
To give in.

To let go.
To abandon hope...

Indeed, it is quite easy to empathize with the followers of Jesus in the text, because we can feel the same way about our world today, can we not?

For anyone with eyes to see, this good old world of ours appears to be going to hell in the proverbial hand basket. Egomaniacal leaders in places like North Korea continue their agendas. There is upheaval in many parts of the world, and instability with nations who now possess nuclear weapons.

We continue to experience terrible draught both at home and abroad. The AIDS pandemic continues to haunt Africa. The very things Jesus described so long ago seem to be front page news all around us. Nation against nation. Wars and rumors of wars. Natural disasters whose damage is of unnatural proportions.

Even the most optimistic might be tempted to ask, “Where does it all end?” “How does it all end?” And, “Where is God at the end?”

These were the disciples’ questions to Jesus in our Gospel lesson. And I like what Jesus tells them.

Jesus says to them, “friends, don’t panic. Don’t come unglued. Don’t lose your heads, and don’t lose heart. Don’t worry. Because when the world seems to be falling apart at your feet, that is actually an opportunity for you to speak of me and to bear witness to me.”

Jesus looks at his followers here and says to them, “when you look around you at what is going on in this world, don’t forget to look behind that to *what is really going on*. And when you see what is really going on, when you see that hope and faith in human wisdom and this world’s structures has failed, that is the time to speak of *me* and turn peoples’ attention to *me*.”

And what was true for Jesus’ followers *then* is true for us *now*. I can’t tell you today *how* and *when* God’s purpose for this old world will finally be fulfilled. I don’t know the day or the hour. Truth be told, no one does, and we should not be focusing there anyway.

Here’s what I *can* tell you today: Jesus did not bring us this far to leave us. And he will not abandon us when the going gets even tougher than it is now.

When things are so bad that we feel like there is nowhere to go, when evil tempts you into thinking that life has no meaning, that is the time to look up, look out, get ready, raise your heads, stand straight up on your tiptoes, because your redemption is drawing near. Your rescue is at hand. Your Savior has not deserted you.

Don’t give up, except to give up your worries and give them over to God. Don’t give in, except to give in to the power of God’s love to bring forth God’s intentions for this world and your life, in spite of what others might say.

It has always been the case that life does not end when we come to the end of our own resources: life begins! Life begins when we come to the end of ourselves, because then we start to put our faith where it belongs, in God, in God's strength and purpose.

When the world as we know it seems to be going down into the abyss, that is the time not to *throw up our hands* in despair, but to *lift up our heads* in faith, for when this world as we know it is ending, God's work is just beginning. God hasn't brought us this far to leave us. He hasn't lifted us up to let us down. In his mercy, he allows us to come to the end of ourselves, that we might look to him.

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let us come with the awareness that it is not our job to know *when* and *how* God is working everything out. That is not for us to know. That is not in our job description.

Our job is to look behind what is going on in our world to perceive what is *really going on*. Our job is to pay attention, so that when we and others are tempted to throw in the towel and give up, we can point to Jesus and speak of him.

So come with faith today. Remember that what look like endings to us, are just beginnings for God. He's still at work in us, and in this world he has made. So come to the Table, and open yourselves to his gracious work in you this day.

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