

Twenty-Third Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C) "Despite the News & the Risk: Don't Weary in Doing What is Right!"

Malachi 4:1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

November 16-17, 2019

Next weekend is Christ the King, the final weekend of the church year. As we approach the end of the year, the Church invites us to reflect on the end of our lives and the very end of time. Our *Celebrate* insert says:

The end is near. There is no doubt about it. The warnings are dire. The tone of today's texts is ominous.

Current events kinda match that tone. Maybe you don't even listen to or read the news because it's too depressing. If so, you've got a lot of company.

A friend sends me newspaper clippings and one I just received include FBI statistics showing that attacks against Jews in this country more than doubled last year. Since our Savior was a Jew and also for the simple fact that Jewish people are our brothers and sisters, that should concern us. Another article reports that "Nones" (agnostics, atheists and those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious) are now about ¼ of the U.S. population, a marked increase from ten years ago. The number of atheists has doubled. Less than ½ of all adults worship at least once a month. "Every age group, racial group and region of the country is less Christian than a decade ago, according to the study."¹

If you read the very short Book of Malachi (only 4 chapters long, the last book of the Old Testament) you'll see that many people in his day had given up on prayer and worship because it didn't seem to do any good. They ask, "Where is the God of Justice?" Things are so bad and God seems so absent they decide to serve their own interests instead of God's. Bad choice, as we heard in today's first lesson:

Count on it: The day is coming, raging like a forest fire. All the arrogant people who do evil things will be burned up like stove wood, burned to a crisp, nothing left but scorched earth and ash – a black day. But for you, sunrise! The sun of righteousness will dawn on those who honor my name, healing radiating from its wings. (Malachi 4:1-2a, The Message)

The standard translation is, “... for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.” A winged sun is one of the oldest religious symbols of any tradition. It’s Hebrew, it’s Egyptian, it’s Mesopotamian.... The sun illuminates the world, warms the world, gladdens the world. We might associate it with the light of Christ....

Those who revere God’s name are those who rely on God rather than themselves, those who trust God’s promises, those who obey God’s command to love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves. That’s not easy. In the Gospel Jesus predicts:

“...They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over... You will be betrayed... and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.” (Luke 21:12a, 16-17)

That’s literally happening to Christians in some corners of the globe. But even here, truly living out our faith has a cost. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred at the end of World War II, called it the cost of discipleship. (He was part of the Confessing Church, a group of people who refused to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler.) Gospel values are not popular in many circles these days. But we receive holy encouragement in this weekend’s lesson from 2 Thessalonians (v. 13):

Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.

I’m guessing some of you have seen the movie *Harriet* about Harriet Tubman. One of the opening scenes shows a black minister singing and preaching to his congregation, made up mostly of enslaved people. He ends the service by quoting the epistle that includes

the line, “Slaves, obey your masters.” The white folks looking on from their porch nod approvingly.

Later on in the action, we see that same black pastor opening a trap door in the floor of his clapboard church and revealing the escaping slaves he’d invited to take refuge there on their journey north to freedom. He was risking a lot. So did Harriet Tubman – she amazingly escaped all on her own, covering 100 miles between Maryland and Philadelphia. Then she returned and returned and returned, risking her life every time. I guess she believed our Lord’s words:

“There’s no telling who will hate you because of me. Even so, every detail of your body and soul – even the hairs of your head! – is in my care; nothing of you will be lost. Staying with it – that’s what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won’t be sorry; you’ll be saved.” (Luke 21:18-19, The Message)

Harriet Tubman personally led 70 slaves to freedom, despite a debilitating condition that made her pass out without any warning. (Her master hit her skull with an andiron when she was a child.) When the Fugitive Slave Act necessitated that slaves escape all the way to Canada and not just to Pennsylvania or New York, other conductors on the Underground Railroad thought they’d have to stop their rescue efforts because of sheer distance. But Harriet said, “I ain’t giving up rescuing slaves because it’s far.” Harriet Tubman was also one of the few women to lead an armed expedition, in her case the Combahee River Road Union Army military strike that freed 750 slaves. Amazingly she lived long enough to die in bed at the age of 91. Her last words were, “I go to prepare a place for you.”

In the Gospel Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. The temple was so immense that must have seemed far-fetched. But his prediction came true when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. Scripture is full of predictions about what will

come to pass, both good and ill. God promises that the Kingdom of God will finally win out. Jesus promises, “By your endurance, you will gain your souls.” In addition to praying, “thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,” we have to work to **help** God’s Kingdom come and we have to allow God’s will to be done in **our** lives and through us, in our world. There are risks. But as our *Celebrate* intro concludes:

The baptized know how to live in the “meantimes.” The baptized are strengthened for the living of these days in word and sacrament. The baptized rally around the invitation of the apostle: “Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.”

And what does the Lord require of us? To do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Amen

¹Ian Lovett, “Religiosity, Church Attendance Fall Sharply” (*Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 18, 2019).

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