

26 Pentecost-C

Malachi 4:1-2

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

The text comes from the gospel and also from the 6th chapter of Micah:

...and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice

and to love kindness

and to walk humbly with your God?

I'd like to begin with a prayer a Jewish friend shared with me:

"O Guardian of life and liberty, may our nation always merit Your protection. Teach us to give thanks for what we have by sharing it with those who are in need. Keep our eyes open to the wonders of creation, and alert to the care of the earth. May we never be lazy in the work of peace; may we honor those who have died in defense of our ideals. Grant our leaders wisdom and forbearance. May they govern with justice and compassion. Help us all to appreciate one another, and to respect the many ways that we may serve You. May our homes be safe from affliction and strife, and our country be sound in body and spirit. "

Imagine how sermon study went last Monday. There were the five of us pastors sitting around the table out at the Chapel--two Baptists, one Reformed, one a United Church of Christ and me, a Lutheran, talking about these texts the day before the ugly, protracted, painful presidential race was to come to its precipitous end. We didn't know what would happen. So in some ways, we had little to say!

Then imagine how the monthly ministerium meeting went on Wednesday morning when I, along with twenty other Lutheran pastors met for worship and conversation. For many, there were tears. This was an unexpected outcome.

Now--I probably don't need to tell you that I had so many mixed feelings in writing this sermon. Because I *love* writing sermons on the days there are to be baptisms. And I tremble with fear when I have to write sermons in the same week as huge national upheavals. How do I manage both realities? Express my sorrow at the rent landscape that is our national circumstance now? And also express my great delight that Sawyer will soon be washed in the waters of baptism and named and claimed as a child of God? How can I do both?

Well, in order to do both, I need to start with Jesus. I need to start with Jesus and his strange, challenging, frightening words in today's gospel:

Then he said to them,

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;

there will be great earthquakes,

and in various places famines and plagues

and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you;

they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons and you will be brought before kings & governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify.

If you haven't noticed, but you probably have, there is a built-in tension in Christian faith. It's the whole "already-but-not-yet" of Christianity that requires us to hold two contradictory things at the same time and to live within the tension created by that. We're told that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the world has been saved. That's the "already" part.

But the "not-yet"? The "not-yet" part is that the world will pass away. "As for these things," Luke records Jesus as saying, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

But the "not-yet" part has been, well, over 2000 years in coming. Faithful Christians have always tried to figure out what's best to do while we're waiting.

I need to cop a biblical history teaching moment here and let you know this: First-century Christians thought the return of Christ was imminent. Like, Christ was coming back right away and that caused a mess of problems. And so you have Paul in 1 Corinthians advising slaves to remain in their enslavement, virgins to remain virgins. Indeed, he says it is actually preferable to remain celibate, as he is! But if that's not your thing, St. Paul makes an allowance for marriage, saying that it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. (Which seems to me is some kind of commentary on what marriage does to passion!)

Then there is Paul, in 1 Thessalonians, the earliest of the New Testament writings, trying to calm the anxiety of the people who fear that their loved ones, now dead, would be lost because they would not be alive for Christ's return. So certain were some people that Christ's return was coming soon, that in 2 Thessalonians, a sterner letter that possibly Paul, though not definitely Paul wrote, we find that the belief in Christ's imminent return divided the community. Thus we get: *Anyone unwilling to work should not eat, for we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.*

So this "already-not-yet" tension in our faith calls us to live in hope, but not in idleness. The promised eternal life with God does not excuse us from full participation in our lives, including preparing for the future lives of those to come.

Now we all know what it means to prepare for the future, right? Mostly we think of this in personal terms, a process of conserving and marshalling our resources so we can control what happens next. We aim for a good investment portfolio to ensure a good retirement; we want a good inheritance for our children. Most of us play an active part in planning for our futures. Which, on a more sober note, leads us to consider, as well, that we must also plan for a future we will *not* be a part of: We draw up wills, fill out health care proxies. We may pre-pay for our funerals so as not to be a financial burden to our families. Sometimes people pre-plan their funeral services with me—and I have to say it is a wonderful gift for family members to know that the hymns and readings and prayers have been specially chosen for them to hear and sing in their loved one's memory.

Of course, in today's Gospel, Jesus, too, is looking toward the future, too. Just not in the way we typically do. He's not got the me-focused lens most of us look through. And so he says of the Temple, the main house of worship for all religious Jews. *As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down,* Then he goes on to talk about all those other cataclysmic events. And so *matter-of-factly!* As if it is not of

such great importance when this is all about to happen. Because it will just happen. And God will let you know then what you're supposed to do. You know, no planning needed.

That's not the first time Jesus has sounded that theme of the precipitous end of things, is it? Remember, earlier in Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the Rich Fool, as it is known. That's the guy who has so much stuff stashed away that he decides to build even more storehouses to hold his possessions. Only God says to him, "*You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared? Whose will they be?*" And Jesus concludes the parable by saying, *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*

For Jesus, the thought of the end of time—the "eschaton" is the fancy theological word for it—is very closely connected to our use of the present time.

And let's be honest: *our* very present time—with the fears and hopes and confusions we have faced this week and will face in the months ahead—is very much on our mind. What will happen next? What can we best do?

Well, you know, here at St. John's, we are starting pretty profoundly this morning. We are starting by baptizing baby Sawyer. We will bring him to marble angel. It's the font where Bob Knapp was baptized, the first baby to be baptized in it, eighty-some years ago. And his grandson, Ethan, will hold the book and be my ready assistant as we baptize Sawyer. And the congregation and the Ecumenical Witnesses will all attest that we are made one through the waters of baptism.

We all know this may be the last baptism to take place at St. John's. But we know it will not be the last baptism. In fact, if I weren't a pastor and had to be in the same place every Sunday, I'd want to be one of the travelling ecumenical witnesses who know that baptism—new life—takes place again and again all the time and in all places.

But the next thing we do, after the baptism—and after the breakfast Ethan and Emily and Reagan have prepared for us—the next thing we do is we resolve to go out and bear witness. We resolve to go out and be witnesses not to baptisms—but if we are able to, what a joy! We go out to bear witness to both justice and injustice.

And when we see witness injustice, we resolve to name it, no matter the risk. We resolve to document it. We resolve to reform it. We resolve to work to correct it.

And when we witness justice done and wrongs righted, guess what? We celebrate! We give thanks!

We bear witness because we know there are grave social ills and we know there is much to be done and we know that we may not all agree all the time (how I wish that we did!). But we bear witness to both justice and injustice because that's what we saw Jesus doing in his life. And we, like Sawyer will be in just a few minutes, have been baptized into his life, his death and his resurrection.

This bearing witness? It will not be easy. We are not living in easy times, that is abundantly clear. Those of you on Facebook know it has been blowing up with articles posted for and against the coming administration. Everybody has an opinion and I suppose everybody is entitled to one. But people of faith—not just Christians, but all people of God—are governed by a rule that is both rigid and wide-reaching: we are to name and redress injustice. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Luther says it in his explanation to the eighth commandment: *We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander or defame our neighbor, but defend her and him, think and speak well of her and him and put the best construction on everything.*

We are to stand with, for and up for our neighbor. And we are to oppose that which hurts them. And so in service to that end, we are called to action and not idleness. We are called to bold service and not faint-hearted quaking. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German martyr in 1945 wrote, "We are

not simply to bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice. We are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

Let us be vigilant witnesses on the lookout for both justice that we might celebrate and injustice that we might not be idle in doing good works. Baptized, nourished, renewed, we will not grow weary in well-doing, remembering the words of Micah with which I began our sermon:

*What does the Lord require of you
but to do justice
and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Let us pray: O Guardian of life and liberty, may our nation always merit Your protection. Teach us to give thanks for what we have by sharing it with those who are in need. Keep our eyes open to the wonders of creation, and alert to the care of the earth. May we never be lazy in the work of peace; may we honor those who have died in defense of our ideals. Grant our leaders wisdom and forbearance. May they govern with justice and compassion. Help us all to appreciate one another, and to respect the many ways that we may serve You. May our homes be safe from affliction and strife, and our country be sound in body and spirit.

Amen.