

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
November 14, 2010
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Scriptures: Malachi 4:1-2a, Psalm 98, 2Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

When the Going Gets Tough

One of my favorite TV channels is Discovery Channel. I enjoy hearing about different things, seeing different places, learning about the world. Now, some of their shows are better than others. Over the years they seemed to have shifted a little bit more to entertainment than education. More of their shows are geared to get ratings out of addressing controversial, mysterious and esoteric topics. And many of those topics are related to religion and the Bible. Some of those shows are about tracking and finding secret codes and obscure meanings in the Bible that supposedly reveal future events. No other kind of biblical genre is more fertile ground for this kind of controversy than apocalyptic literature. Many live fascinated with the mystery of this kind of reading which, they say, is all about foretelling the miseries and devastations that are supposed to happen at the end of times. And to be sure, at first sight, that's what you seem to find in some biblical texts like the one we are dealing with today in the gospel. Jesus words seem to be a warning of things that will happen.

In reality, we make a mistake if we pretend to interpret this and similar texts like a cheap fortune cookie or like a magical crystal ball that will foretell things to come. We need to be careful because these are dangerous texts. They are dangerous not because of the misfortunes that supposedly are going to happen, but because they may lure some into trying to predict that. What many fail to see is that it has never worked. How many times have we heard of announcements about the end of the world? In spite of all the ominous predictions, we are still here, aren't we? No surprise though. They don't work because that's not what the text is intended for. The problem in reading texts like this one is that we keep trying to gaze into the future. We keep trying to figure out what's going to happen. Needless to say, that's a vain and faithless attempt. It's vain because it's about self preservation. The only reason we want to know what will happen in the future is so that we can figure out how to accommodate ourselves to that future. In other words, if we were to know for sure the world is ending tomorrow chances are that people would flock to churches in an effort to garner a few more points before checking out. We are trying to be masters of the Word of God for our own benefit.

More importantly, to try to foretell the future seems to be like lack of faith in God. When we become so preoccupied and concerned about what will happen, and how it will happen, we don't seem to put our trust in God. If Jesus died in the cross so that we can have forgiveness, redemption, and life, why should we even wonder about our future? Why should we even be concerned about what will happen to us? Why should we even think about tomorrow? If we believe that Christ died so that we may have salvation, shouldn't that give us confidence about our future? Instead of being concerned about things that have not happened, shouldn't we be focusing on what's happening now? I guess that an

appropriate measure of wondering and maybe even planning for our lives can't hurt. In fact, it can give us direction and a sense of purpose for the work we do. Nevertheless, that cannot be done at the expense of the present. And that's what can give us a more faithful understanding of this text: a focus on the present time.

When we put our attention in the time and place when and where we are, we have a better chance of bringing this text into perspective. Many times people wonder if the Bible is still relevant to the time we live. For many, some of these biblical texts seem to be so very out of touch with our modern world. But that's because we are still thinking they belong to a time that is not ours. Either we think they belong to a time and place long gone or we believe they are about things that have not happened. In either case, we fail to focus on the here and now. What we need to be asking is how is this passage about more than an end of the world that hasn't happened but instead about our present lives? How is this particular world God related to what's happening in our current lives?

For one thing, we can take a look at the letter to the Thessalonians. In the time Paul was writing letters to the churches of antiquity, they were expecting passages like the ones we read today to become a reality within their lifetime. And because things would happen in the near future, they ceased to pay attention to their present time. So they thought, "Well, if Christ is coming then I don't need to be doing anything else. I'll just sit and wait." Essentially they became so focused on waiting and expecting the end of things as they know them, that they stopped caring for the world around them. They even decided to stop working and survive on the charity of others. I like this quote from a commentator on the second reading. She says, "We live by faith, but we live the life of faith with our feet firmly planted on planet earth." The world and our obligation to it and to our neighbor doesn't stop for the sake of an expectant vigilance on the returning of the Messiah. Still, some of them simply became idle.

Which reminds me of a repair man that went to fix a stained glass window in the church where I did my internship. At the time everybody was talking about the new millennium and how the world, again, was going to end. This fellow was particularly interested in such themes and he tried to convince the pastor and me about the futility of the present time. Long story short, he finished his job and presented his bill.

"But wait a minute," the pastor said, "why should I pay this bill if the world is about to end?" It was very funny to see him backpedaling and trying to explain why we had to pay our bill in spite of the things soon to come. And that's what was going on with those Christians of the first century. They confused a redeemed future with a forgotten present. But that's not how the kingdom of God is realized in our midst. So Paul calls them up to action. Paul called them and is calling us to work, to ministry. Not because in doing so we become concerned for the future, but because in continually supporting and helping each other we live out the kingdom of God right here, right now.

Once again, we are called to pay attention to what's in front of us in the present time. The apocalyptic tone of Jesus words is not meant to take our mind away to some unknown reality. On the contrary he calls us to be mindful of what we are doing now. Have you noticed people going around hungry? Have you paid attention to those suffering because of the ravages of war? Even now the people of Haiti are still living in devastation after

the terrible earthquake earlier this year. What are these, signs of the end of the world or opportunities to bring the love and compassion of God alive? Ironic as it may seem, these are not the signs of an impending doom but opportunities for testimony and discipleship. We can testify about God's unfailing love in our time of distress. We can spread our belief in a God that does not abandon us when we are in need. We can tell others of that burning sensation in our hearts, like those disciples on his way to Emmaus, when the Word of God gladdens our hearts even in the midst of difficult times. Hasn't that been the case of this congregation? Haven't you seen before very difficult, trying times in the history of this church? As the saying goes, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. And inevitably that desire to say how much God has done in our lives becomes also the desire to help others do the same. Our testimony becomes also our discipleship. We translate our praise into action. So we feed the hungry and we help those in need, with whatever little resources we have at our disposal, but we do it. The time of our need becomes the opportunity for us to serve. Isn't that what the cross is about? The time of suffering becomes the time used by God to forgive and save and redeem. So we also are called not to be idle, not to panic, not to waiver but to be renovated in faith and hope and continue to do the work we've been called to. Amen.