

"Living Right to the End"

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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November 14, 2004
Trinity Lutheran Church

Malachi 4:1-2a; Psalm 98;
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, and Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The beach was beautiful – the sands were golden, the sea sparkling, and people everywhere were enjoying themselves. And there in the midst of them sat Linus and Lucy, the Peanuts characters with which you're all familiar. There they were, on the beach, enjoying the sun and the sea, and industriously working on building a sand castle. No matter how you looked at it, it was quite magnificent. When they finished their labors, they sat back to admire their work. "A thousand years from now," pontificated Lucy, "people will look at what we've built here today and be totally amazed!"

That may have been what the disciples were thinking, and the people of Jerusalem felt, when they looked at the temple, the temple rebuilt by Herod. It was perched on the Temple Mount – 145 acres of prime real estate (approximately thirty football fields), and there it was above the city of Jerusalem, constructed upon what was the largest man-made platform ever built in the ancient world, topped by the magnificent walled structure that was the Temple. No wonder the disciples, simple Galilean fishermen, were in awe. Its destruction was unthinkable; it was impossible, beyond one's imagination. Wasn't it, after all, the great dwelling place of God, who couldn't possibly desert it to destruction? And yet Jesus says to the disciples that all this will be swept away. It will all become rubble, and not a stone will be left standing. The shocked disciples at once want to know when such destruction would occur, and what signs there would be that they might know of it in advance so that they can be adequately prepared.

People still seek signs of the coming of the end of time. In our society, in our time, in this very day, books and articles about an apocalyptic future are big business. Perhaps the best example of what I'm talking about can be seen in the "Left Behind" series, books and now a movie. Such books grow out of a particular way of viewing God's relationship with the world and with its people. More specifically, they dwell on what will happen on Judgment Day, when the world comes to a terrible end. This is of particular concern to those conservative Christians who, in our own time, attempt to locate our current time on some sort of theological timetable before the final rapture, when the faithful will be sucked up into heaven, and the damned will be shipped to hell. There are plenty of people around us who are only too ready to tell us exactly how such events will unfold.

This type of thinking was popularized with a renegade Irish Anglican priest decades ago; his name was John Nelson Darby. The form of thought he developed, I might add, is behind these books and movies, and it's roundly condemned by ELCA theologians today. Darby came up with a notion which he labeled the "seven dispensations". We currently live under the dispensation of grace, when people, according to Darby, are judged by their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The dispensation to follow is what he calls the dispensation of the millennial kingdom, to be inaugurated by the battle of Armageddon and the destruction of the wicked which will usher in a one thousand year worldly reign of Jesus Christ. Between now and then, Darby warns us, we're in for a very rough time indeed.

But why am I telling you all of this? First, because all of us at one time or another, wonder how we will fare when we arrive before God on Judgment Day. Second, at a time when the type of thinking demonstrated by the "Left Behind" series becomes so popular that people around us begin to see fiction as fact, and non-biblical material as biblical, the time has come to put things to rights.

Nonetheless, the ideas of Darby and his followers are ideas that hold sway among many Americans this very day. They're held by people who would like to see Israel, and Israel alone, dominate the Holy Land and allowed to predominate, and such ideas may well shape international policy, including our own, especially at such times as this, with the death of Yasser Arafat and the opening of new possibilities for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian question.

Ideas about the end of time certainly shaped the thinking of people for whom Luke wrote. They had seen the destruction of the Temple which the Romans had accomplished before the Gospel was written. So the first important thing to note is that the Gospel was written not for the world; it wasn't written for the predictors; it wasn't written for the prognosticators; and it wasn't written for the forecasters. It was written specifically for the community of faith – not as a pronouncement on the times and the people in general, but for those who specifically followed Christ and were living in enormously difficult and dangerous times. And because that's so, it's written also for you and for me, for our time. Although our times might not be quite as dangerous as they were in Jesus' time, they're certainly threatening; terrorism is the outstanding example. And they're difficult times, as well – the death of Yasser Arafat, Israel, the Middle East, Iran, Iraq, and that whole area of problems.

The second important thing to note is that the very first communities of faith were just as concerned about the end times and the Day of Judgment as we are. If one could only figure out exactly what was happening and exactly where one was in God's grand scheme of things, then everything could be managed and things wouldn't be quite so frightening. There is here a deep-seated fear about how one will fare when finally one is brought face-to-face with God on judgment day. Deep down, maybe unconsciously held for some of us, lies a great personal concern: Where am I with God? Does He care about me? Am I saved? And what am I to make of the very real and threatening times in which I live?

There are three such concerns that Luke addresses directly in this morning's Gospel. First: that human institutions, no matter how great and grand, are transitory. They come and they go and, like Linus and Lucy's sand castle, the tides of time eventually wash them away. Second, being faithful to Christ will eventually lead one to being, at best, misunderstood by those people one would expect to be understanding, and at worst, suffering persecution because there are, and there will be, times when society or government, or both, will not tolerate the position and beliefs held by Christians. And third, the signs of the times, no matter how horrific, how wretched, how tortured or unjust are just that – signs of that particular time. The world is the world is the world – get used to it, Luke might have said. But neither the darkness of the world at any given time, nor its light at any given time, should be taken to mean that the end is near and judgment imminent. The end will come in God's good time.

Oh yes, there will be an end, and there will be a judgment; there will for some, be a weeping and gnashing of teeth; and there will be for others, an astonished and surprised joy. But when the time is, God's not telling.

So, what's a faithful Christian to do?

First: recognize that God is always coming amongst us. His presence is real and renewing. A seminary family and two seminarians who receive a gift from a concerned congregation after a devastating fire find themselves touched by God's grace poured out through people whom they have never met and people they probably will never know.

A family in crisis is deeply touched when they hear that their congregation has been carrying them in their prayers. A sense of divine presence and touch when a pastor lays hands of blessing on a person's head and pronounces a blessing of healing.

God has set no limit on His presence in the world. All that can be done, then, is to be alert, to watch, to wait. For who knows when you will catch a very real glimpse of God's presence in your life, or in the life of someone you know. That's what Luke tells us Christ asks for, that we might be ready, and doing, and living our faith as instruments of God's love and channels of God's grace. That's all there is to it – live. Live, giving yourself to others and in so giving, give yourself to God. Read the papers. Watch the news. Hear – but don't listen to – the prognosticators, the pollsters and the pundits, and with a grain of salt, take them for what they really are. Enjoy the *"Left Behind"* series, if that's what you want to read, just know that it's not the word of God. And finally, finally, build sand castles on the beaches of your life. Enjoy them. Have fun building them. Just don't expect them to last.

Amen.

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