

Sermon on Luke 21:5-10, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13  
26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, November 13, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ....

Today I have a confession to make: that I have been trying all week to find words of hope, comfort and inspiration for you, my community of faith, and it has been very difficult to find them. I have been trying to find some good news to share, and coming up empty. Probably not a good thing when we are observing a Sunday where we seek to encourage faithful, generous giving in the Church – out of thanksgiving to God for all that we have been given in Christ. Ever since election day we have seen and heard from those who are celebrating, those who are stunned, those who are happy and those who are angry, those who are grieving and those who are afraid for the future. It's hard to know what to say in response to all of this. But we do know this: that it is good and right for us to gather as a community of faith – the Church – on the Lord's Day, to worship and to pray. This much is certain: it is good for us to gather in the name of Jesus, to confess and forgive sin, to praise God and to hear God's Word, to pray and to receive the body and blood of Christ at our Lord's Table. So as we wonder what to think and what to say, we begin in prayer and by hearing the Word of God. So what does God's Word say to us today?

Well, we have first heard difficult words from the Old Testament prophet Malachi and from Jesus himself in the gospel. We hear warnings that “the end is near” – ominous warnings that don't give us much comfort. (In these last Sundays in the church year and as the Advent season begins, these warnings from the prophets are commonly chosen for our lectionary calendar of readings. Is it just me, or is it a coincidence that warnings of doom and gloom commonly follow our November elections every other year?)

First there is Malachi, whose name means “my messenger” was an active member of the post-exile community, who had returned from exile in Babylon about 500 years before Jesus was born. Malachi gave about six sermons recorded in this final prophetic book in the Old Testament. His messages are critical of the people and their priests for their behavior and their complaints against God, for their lack of faith and their need to repent. The last of these sermons is what we read today, in which Malachi speaks of a day of judgment that is coming:

*“Behold the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up....But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”* Malachi closes by telling the

people to remember the teachings of Moses, and promises that the God will send the prophet Elijah before the day of the Lord comes – so he ends on a more positive note! For the Jewish people have this expectation from those early days of the prophet Elijah’s return – and continue the custom today of having an empty place set for Elijah at the Passover table. In a few Sundays we will see how the gospel writers saw the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness as the possible return of Elijah, preaching the gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins, preparing for the coming of Jesus. But with Malachi we first hear this messenger of God, who was sent to “prepare the way of the Lord – who will come like a refiner’s fire, to purify the descendants of Levi” (as hear in the music of Handel’s *Messiah!*).

The gospel lesson from Luke quotes words from Jesus said in Jerusalem, after Palm Sunday, but shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. He had been teaching in the Temple and had just seen the rich people place their gifts into the treasury for the poor. Then he saw a poor widow put her offering in – just two copper coins – and told his disciples that her offering was greater than all of those rich folks who gave out of their abundance, but she had shared all that she had to live on, out of her poverty.

And then his disciples remarked how beautiful the Temple was, how grand it was with such large stones – and Jesus said “*the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.*” So, was Jesus predicting the future fall of Jerusalem here? Who knows? Those were intense days, when the people of Jerusalem and all Palestine lived under Roman occupation, and talk of revolution was in the air. We do know that the Temple did come down, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem during the Jewish revolt in 70 A.D., about 40 years after Jesus’ crucifixion. Luke wrote this gospel about 15 years after Jerusalem’s destruction, so this cataclysmic event must have been on his mind, and those of his readers. Perhaps it was more a *reflection* on such terrible events, rather than a *prediction* of them. Much like the events of September 11, 2001 are remembered vividly by us today, 15 years later, as well as the election five days ago that is so fresh on our minds. When Jesus’ disciples asked him “when will this be?”, Jesus didn’t give them a time or a date. That was unknown. He simply told them not to be afraid when they heard of such things happening – of wars and insurrections – but to use those times as *opportunities to testify!*

Now, such passages as these about the end times are frequently abused and misinterpreted by preachers and false prophets. In our own era, television evangelists have called the tragedy of 9-11 God’s judgment on our nation for the “secularization of America” and “lifestyles” of people which they disapprove. They did the same when hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 (disregarding the fact that the hurricane destroyed churches as well as cities). No doubt there are

those who see every natural disaster or war as a sign of God's judgment on wayward human beings, disregarding the compassion and care which God has for all suffering human beings – and the work of the faithful who provide this care.

So how should we interpret such biblical passages about disasters that strike human beings today? What clues do we see from Jesus in his own words? Well, we see them in the words “do not be terrified”, “beware that you are not led astray,” and “this will give you an opportunity to testify”. Testify to what? That we are not afraid because we are the Lord's, we belong to God, and that God is with us, whatever happens in this world. Jesus warned the disciples that they would be persecuted, and hauled before the courts to testify to the faith – but to have courage, because *“not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”* Once again, was this a prediction or a reflection?

Finally, a word about the second lesson, from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica. Evidently there was an issue in the church over those who took literally the testimony that “Christ is coming soon” and stopped working, in order to pray. They were idle, letting others do the work in order that everyone be fed. What was more faithful – to pray and wait for the Lord, or to work in the fields, if the world were soon to end? Well, people throughout the ages have misinterpreted this passage also, seeing in Paul's words condemnation against those who were idle and didn't work. But instead of condemning them, Paul actually encouraged them in the midst of their prayers and patient waiting, to quietly do their work and earn their own living, just as he was doing. And he implored the whole church to *“not be weary in doing what is right”!* Which also means that the church should continue to care for those who are vulnerable and in need, as a witness to the Lord who cares for everybody – who heals the sick, feeds the hungry and clothes the naked. (This was uncommon in the Roman Empire.) And do not judge others lest we be judged, for this is the work of the Church, the Body of Christ.

So after looking through the scripture texts assigned for this Sunday for preaching, and after all that has happened this week on election day and since, the most fitting words I found have come from this passage: *“Brothers and sisters: do not be weary in doing what is right.”*

It's simple and concise. Whether you are talking about stewardship of time, talent and treasure in our daily lives, or dealing with the stress and challenges of living in a world overwhelmed by electoral politics and division (when 50 percent of the people will be disappointed every time), these words are helpful. And even better, we receive them as good news! There is no shame in them – they are simply an encouragement from the apostle Paul to never get tired doing what is right and good! In these days when there is so much anger, disappointment, and blame going around, when we are searching for our direction as a Church, and what to do with our resources, the words of our Lord are clear: *love one another!*

So I close with a prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi:  
*Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union;  
Where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.  
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*

This is the true “stewardship” of our gifts – the gifts of faith, hope and love that we have received as the true gift of God. We have seen them in the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us all exemplify them in the witness of our lives in the days and years ahead, when they are so much need in our world. Thanks be to God!  
Amen.