

November 13, 2022
Pentecost 23, Proper 28 C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Canticle 9

2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13

Luke 21: 5-19

This mornings' lessons are a bit of an odd assortment. The Isaiah passage is one that is related to other passages in Isaiah that have been called a description of the 'peaceable kingdom'. It was likely written near the end of the Babylonian Captivity or in the post exilic period when the people of Israel were released from Babylon and returned to inhabit Judah and Jerusalem. It is the celebration of a new day and a new era for the people of Israel. Interestingly, it is the same passage that is read on Easter day in some years. In times like these, it may be hard to hold on to the notion that God could be doing a new and wonderful thing, but we are called to live into that as disciples of the risen Christ. In fact, we are God's new creation every day!

The other 2 lessons are rather hard to understand, especially without context. Mark Twain once said that most people are troubled by portions of the Bible they do not understand, but he was most troubled by what he did understand! Amen to that!

These two passages of scripture refer to the end times--what we should be doing and what we should be expecting. Perhaps after the recent election and ongoing division and strife, we may feel like we are in the end times! But don't despair, God is ever with us, and closer than our own breath! And let me just say here, there are people that wish I were more political in my preaching, but that, in my opinion, would be a failure to preach the gospel. To be sure, the gospel has implications for the way we live and how we engage in civic debate – which we should be doing; we should not think that our faith has nothing to do with how we act and vote and strive for a moral and just society! And thankfully, as the church, we

should be a place of retreat and solace from the chaos and confusion, but not to ignore the world 'out there', but to live and model what the Gospel inspires us to do. We have republicans, independents, and democrats in this congregation, but more importantly for us, we have Christ and each other. And more than ever we need to be a place of witness where those who are buffeted by all the political and social mayhem, can come in here and see how love opens hearts, enlightens respect, and focuses on building the reign of Christ wherever we can. Every church across this country needs to take seriously their witness to the same love, grace, and power of Christ – and to take this into the streets, market places, schools, and towns. Our country needs this stabilizing influence more than ever!

And sometimes some simple hard work, as St. Paul suggested in this reading from Thessalonians, can help us build perspective too. The last month or so Doug and I have been busy getting the wood in and stacked, putting the garden to bed, and other typical seasonal chores. As Doug said to me to get me into gear, "well if the world doesn't end with all this upheaval, then we might just need to burn wood this winter to stay warm and it ain't stacking itself!" Sigh, grounding words.....and sometimes the blessing of monotonous physical exertion to clear the head and gain perspective!

So where do we go to calm ourselves and focus attention for ministry? Paul's letter to the Thessalonians and Jesus' message to his disciples do provide some good food for thought as faithful people. Paul was writing to a church that was very much anticipating the return of Christ any moment, and this context is important for understanding his words and his tone. It seems some had decided to give up working and were living off the kindness of others, because, they figured, why work if Jesus is coming soon. Paul sternly reprimanded them: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat."! And he reminded them that even though he could make claim on them for support, he continued in his trade as an example to them ---he was said to be a tent maker (Acts 18:3).

I imagine this appeals to our Yankee sensibilities – the good old Protestant American work ethic. But I want to expand that notion into a call to active ministry for each of us. Regardless of what happens in politics, pandemic, climate change, and social upheaval of our day, our duty and our joy as followers of Jesus is to continue to share the good news – which are the teachings of Jesus that should shape us, and in turn,

our culture and country. There is work to do in every generation to remind us, who claim to be followers, about the teaching of Jesus to love, to serve, to walk humbly, to forgive your brothers and sisters 70 times 7, to care for and protect those who are unable to care for themselves, to care for God's creation, to embody the 'fruits of the spirit' as Paul taught: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. Do we live those? Do we challenge brothers and sisters who call themselves Christians to remember these values and the ethic of Jesus? That isn't partisan politics, it is the Gospel, the good news we cherish! And, as Jesus said in this gospel passage this morning, we will likely be persecuted for it!

But we need to stay passionate about this Gospel, while all the while keeping the long view of history and the power of Love to ultimately win – that is our story too. Jesus' message to his disciples who were asking about the 'end times' was, though a little scary, still a stabilizing message. He said you hear all kinds of rumors and all kinds of signs will take place (and did you notice that the signs he mentioned pretty much happen in every generation, and even mentions insurrection!), and you will be persecuted for his sake. Now it must be said that even though the Gospel writer has these words coming from Jesus, this Gospel was written long after the time of Jesus and to an early Christian community that was probably experiencing these things, and probably after the Jewish revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., but still it stands as good advice to us today. If we are passionate about the Gospel, we will upset people who just don't want to be reminded of the teachings of Jesus.

An interesting little aspect of this message is Jesus' advice about not planning your response for debates ahead of time. Man, is that ever a tall order! How many of us have had the experience after a verbal altercation where we suddenly thought of something brilliant to say and wish we had said THAT! So what, for heaven's sake, could Jesus be saying here?

Well, have you ever known someone who just knew their subject so well because they had lived and breathed it for so long that it all just flowed out naturally and the authority with which they spoke on their subject was clear in the giving and without pride or haughtiness? Think Bishop Curry and his sermon at diocesan convention last week! Well, for me, Jesus' subtext is you gotta make sure you are living and breathing this faith, then the Spirit will come through you like the light from a beacon of a

light house – clear and far-reaching! Then Jesus says that by our endurance we will gain our souls. Indeed.

The Anglican Communion has been a church that often tried to avoid big doctrinal statements. One of the sayings of Anglicans, partly because there was such diversity from the beginning, is that we learn about our theology and our unity when we pray together. The Book of Common Prayer has been that stabilizing force for the church and for the individual. You see, the BCP was first written expressly in the English language, not in church Latin, so that everyone would be encouraged to practice prayer. And similarly, in Protestantism in general, people were encouraged to read the Bible – previously only the domain of ordained people and scholars. People were encouraged to, as in our collect this morning, “to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them”.

So what does this have to do with my topic this morning? Well, the use of the Prayer Book coupled with the reading of scripture helps to daily ‘form’ me in the work Jesus would have me do and how he would have me do it. It is, as it were, my spiritual equivalent of stacking wood – in the ‘exertion’ my head and spirit are cleared and I feel more grounded. And regardless of all the problems and challenges we now face, or the end of the world, or persecution, we will know this assurance of the Spirit that Jesus speaks of and not be rattled from the Way of Love; for behold, in us, God is creating a new Jerusalem!