

Advent 1, Yr. C

December 2, 2018

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-26

Each week there are words or themes in the scripture readings that reach out for your attention. And this week, probably because of the death of Fran Peterson, there are two things that I'd like us to think about. The first, of course, is endings. We talked about apocalyptic literature last week and those themes of endings, of God coming to set things right, permeate the Advent readings. But you'll remember that there's something else about that kind of writing, in that it's meant to REVEAL hidden truth, so that those to whom the writing are addressed are able to see more deeply, to see into what's REALLY going, what God intends, what's going to come to pass. It's meant to reassure, of course, but I think it's also meant to show us who we really are in the eyes of God and how we are intended to function in God's plan. And those ideas can easily be coupled with the call to holiness that Paul issues to the Thessalonians. And I think that if we are indeed living lives of holiness then that rather odd admonition in Luke, when he tells his readers

that when the heavens are shaking and everyone is filled with fear and foreboding, instead of ducking for cover, they are supposed to **STAND UP AND RAISE YOUR HEADS, BECAUSE YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR!** They can do that because they've been living righteous and holy lives, lives in anticipation of these very events.

Advent readings are all about waiting, not only for the commemoration of Christ's birth, but perhaps more importantly, for Christ's coming at the end of time. As such, they constantly remind us that we're meant to be living in the kingdom which is here, but which is also coming – not **FULLY** here. So we're living in these in-between times, but with the knowledge necessary to understand how to live so as to both see the in-breaking of the kingdom and to facilitate that in-breaking.

So endings. But also the holy lives that we live while we're waiting for those endings. Because endings are individual as well as cosmic.

When I preached at Fran's funeral, I was able to say that the last time I saw her, shortly before her death, she told me that she had tried, her whole life, to

bring grace, beauty and joy into the world. Those of us who knew her knew that she had accomplished that, and in spades. Somehow, from an early age, that had been her intention. She had lived with the idea and the reality of holiness. I was reminded of a line from a poem that asks, “Tell me, my dear, what you are going to do with your one precious life.”

That’s it, isn’t it? We have this one precious life, this one span of time. And as today’s scriptures remind us, it doesn’t go on forever. At a certain point, our time too will run out and it will be too late – too late for the things we intended to do or to say. And as I’m sure you’re aware, the saddest funerals are those in which people left things too late and are left with remorse and regret.

We could say that the challenge of these scriptures is to live a life of holiness. How do we think of holiness? I think it’s unfortunate that most of us grew up with the idea that holiness was reserved for a few people who lived these extraordinary lives (usually in the Middle Ages) – above and beyond anything we could ever accomplish. That idea is perpetuated, I think, by some of the biographies of saintly people that leave out all the struggles they

went through – we get a truncated version, with just the good stuff, leaving us with the impression that holiness is for just a very few. But what if we think of holiness differently, what if we think of it as coming to live with a kind of God-consciousness, living in such a way that, as one theologian said, EVERYTHING CRIES OUT GOD to us? What if we set out to live in a God-filled universe, because, of course, that's exactly what we're doing, we just don't realize it most of the time. What if each of us has been invited to holiness, chosen to live lives that show forth the loving and forgiving face of God? What if holiness isn't some abstract idea of being set apart somehow, but rather a calling to assume the life of a responsible Christian right here and now, right where we are?

I read a story, undoubtedly apocryphal, by Fred Craddock. It was about his uncle who rescued a greyhound dog from the racetrack. They are usually retired when they can't race anymore and the lucky ones are adopted. Fred said he was visiting his uncle one day and the dog was there playing with the kids and he struck up a conversation with the dog, asking him why he wasn't racing any more –

was he too old? “No,” the dog said, “I was doing fine; still young enough to race.” “Well, then,” came the next question, “were you not winning anymore?” “No,” the dog replied, “I was still winning,” “ Not making enough money for your owner” Fred asked. “No, “I was bringing in lots of money.” “Well, why then, did you stop racing?” Fred asked. “Because,” the dog replied, “I realized that the rabbit I was chasing wasn’t real.”

I’m guessing that most of us here have lived long enough to know what’s REAL in the sense of what we should be pursuing. But perhaps we’re never articulated that what we’re designed for, what we’re created for, is a life of holiness. We’re each meant to be a saint.

I think that that means, among other things, living with trust in the promises of God – with the conviction that individual human destiny is powerfully presided over by this LOVING ONE who wills and works for good. And it means understanding that while God’s promises aren’t fully in hand, living reverently, and deliberately and fully awake to those promises IS already living in those

promises – that the living while we're waiting is as rich as it will be at the end. It also means trusting and cultivating a sense of the consciousness of the presence of God. Thomas Merton has a wonderful essay in which he writes about getting a glimpse of this in ordinary men and women. "It was," he said, "as though I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God....This little point... is the pure glory of God in us. It is, so to speak, His name written in us...It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish

completely. ...I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.  
*(Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander)*

There's another, perhaps more mundane way of thinking about holiness – as the ability to see a need and then respond to that need. It helps, I think, to note when we see these things in action and so I'd like to end with two stories. The first is one that Pat told when we were driving to Fran's funeral. She has two grandchildren, Ben, who is five and his new baby sister, Emmie, who is 3 months. The parents have a camera of some kind on the crib, so as to keep tabs on the baby. Pat's son said that one day he heard Emmie, squeaking a bit, so he checked the camera. After a bit, from the side, he saw a little hand coming through the bars of the crib, giving the baby her pacifier. And then, a moment later, that same little hand, reaching in again, to gently pull the blanket up around her. Did Ben have theological, kingdom thoughts? I'm sure not, but he was definitely living out the kingdom theology of love, of simply seeing a need of a brother or sister and doing what you could to alleviate that need. The other story was in my file and was from a couple of

years ago. It was the story of a NY police officer who was captured on a cell phone by a tourist. What it pictured was this officer kneeling down and putting shoes on the feet of a homeless man who was sitting on the sidewalk. The article said that the officer, Lawrence Deprimo, recalled the encounter: “It was freezing out and you could SEE the blisters on the man’s feet. I had two pairs of socks and it was still cold.” They started talking and he found out the man’s shoe size. As he man walked slowly down 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. on his heels, the officer went into a shoe store. The store manager said, “We were just kind of shocked. Most of us are New Yorkers and we just kind of pass by that kind of thing...” But then he volunteered to give the officer his employee discount to bring down the regular \$100 price on the all-weather boots. The officer said he has kept the receipt in his vest since then, “to remind me that sometimes people have it worse.” He was unaware that his picture had been taken, but when asked about it later said he didn’t know the man’s name, but added that his face lit up at the sight of the boots. (NYT 11-19-2012)

There's a line from the Talmud which tells us not to be daunted by the world's grief, but instead to do justice now, to love mercy now, to walk humbly with God now. "You are not obligated to complete the work," the Talmud says, "but neither are you free to abandon it."

If you're uncomfortable calling it sanctity, just say that that kind of living is both our calling and our great joy. Amen.