

24 Pentecost, Proper 28, Yr. A

November 15, 2020

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, Psalm 90, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11,
Matthew 25:14-30

At this time of year, as we come to the end of the liturgical year, if not the calendar year, the lectionary always focuses on the end of time. Paul addresses this specifically in his letter to the Thessalonians. Just like many people in our time, and perhaps all times, there's a lot of interest in the end. Yes, Paul tell, them, it will come. But it will come like a thief in the night, when you least expect it. Those times will come upon us suddenly, like a woman going into labor and there won't be any escape. But, you don't need to worry, because you are already children of light and are living accordingly. Don't be afraid. Just keep on living as you are, soberly, staying awake to the reality of that to which you have been called, living as people who are confident in their salvation through Christ. He's trying to convince them that the question WHEN WILL THIS END, is the wrong question. Rather they should be asking themselves HOW they should be living here and now, in the meantime, in light of the fact that there will be an end at some point. Last week we talked about the GAP – the gap between what IS and WHAT SHOULD BE, the gap between the Garden of Eden before the snake and the New Jerusalem. That's what Paul's talking about as well. Living in the gap, living in the meantime.

Last week there was that part in Paul's letter about being caught up in the air to meet Jesus and I talked a bit about that being the scripture line that supports the whole rapture idea. Whenever these scriptures come up, I take a look at the Rapture Index, which purports to rate those events that mean that the end is coming nearer. A lot of people want to know the answer to this,

just like some in Paul's Thessalonian congregation. But if you stop and think about it, you have to wonder why exactly. What if you COULD know the day and the hour? What then? What would you do? Some groups go the tops of mountains, presumably to welcome the returning Christ. To date, all of them have come back down and recalculated. The last fellow I read about, predicted the end twice, was wrong both times, came down and moved to California. Some people move to isolated places, say Idaho and store up food and guns to protect that food from others. But if it is indeed the end, what good would that do? And then there are the wags who say that it's all about Looking Busy because Jesus is Coming. Perhaps the more relevant question is, if Jesus DID come, what would you like him to find you doing? I'm guessing hoarding food and fighting off the neighbors isn't the answer. Perhaps each of us needs to think about that question and, whatever the answer is for you, maybe that's what you should be doing right now. If Jesus came back right now, what do I want him to find me doing?

There's a tie in here to the parable about the talents. You'll remember that a talent is a LOT of money. One talent would be equal to about 15 years of wages for a laborer. So even the fellow who got just the one really got a windfall. It would be like winning the lottery. I have friends who speculate about what they would do with lottery winnings. One said that she'd have the world's best intentions to give it all away but then, she said, I'd start thinking that maybe I deserved that lake house, or whatever. One said that she'd get the grandkids through college and pay off everyone's mortgages but she said that her brother said that he'd give everyone in the family a year of free gas, which she thought was a failure of both generosity and imagination. Frankly, I think winning would be a huge test.

The third fellow in our parable didn't pass that test. He took the talent and buried it. Instead of seeing this as an opportunity, he saw the whole thing as a burden, something to be rid of as soon as possible. SAFETY is his issue. The text says that the master was gone a long time – it must have been agony for this fellow because he wanted nothing more than to give it BACK. He probably was ridden with anxiety and exhausted from too many sleepless nights.

You may remember that I have said that one way to read the Bible is to ask ourselves those three questions: what is this saying about God, what is it saying about humans and what it is saying about the relationship between the two. We can look at today's scriptures using that lens.

If we look first at the Zephaniah reading, he's talking about the end, as well. Last week we heard from Amos preaching about the Day of Lord. Here's Zephaniah doing the same. The Day of the LORD – the day when God would come and straighten everything out. So, as to God, the text is saying that God will not be mocked. At some point, all the evil will be eradicated and everything will be set to rights. As to humans, though, they aren't all that concerned about that. They are pretty complacent. Just as Amos was concerned about empty ritual, Zephaniah is concerned that, for all intents and purposes, for his listeners, God is irrelevant. God is gone, or not paying attention, or just doesn't care – and we can go on without regard to God. I think back to the 60's when a theologian wrote that God was DEAD. He was saying just what Zephaniah was saying – not that God was dead but insofar as it matters to people's daily lives, he might as well be dead.

If we look at the psalm from the human point of view, it's about our frailty – 70 or maybe 80 years at most. But it's also about the God who has been and continues to be our refuge and we pray

that God will teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. We aren't going to be here forever, the psalmist says. And in the time that we have we need to be wise enough to figure out what makes for the best, the most virtuous life – the life that bridges those gaps we've been talking about.

In one way or another, the readings set out the human response to God and the world that God intends.

On one end there is the refusal to even look at the gap. There's complacency. God's vision doesn't matter, there won't be an accounting, I can safely ignore it all and just keep on keeping on. I know I've mentioned Neil Postman's book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. I suppose it could be titled Nero Fiddling while Rome Burns. Postman cautions that we are tempted to fill our days with amusement and distraction. If those days are full enough, we don't even have to look.

Then maybe there's the person who looks, but quickly turns away and denies first or all that there are any problems and but then that, if there are, they aren't MY concern. Here the book that comes to mind is Christopher Lasch's book, *The Culture of Narcissism*. I'm here to get mine; I don't have to worry about anyone else. I'll be out of here before it all falls apart. The Day of Lord doesn't have anything to do with me.

Then there are those who would save themselves. The ones who are most concerned about when so that they'll be safe somehow.

And then there are those who have looked and understood. And there the temptation is to be overwhelmed and paralyzed, somewhat like the third fellow in the parable. I have talent, I have gifts, but the problems are too big for me. I'm not going to stick my neck out, or take any risks.

But here we hear the scriptures' message, over and over again: Don't be afraid. Can we hear that and trust in God, a God who as Paul says, has destined us for salvation, not for wrath? Can we understand that we've been given gifts and opportunities to use them to bless others but also for our own well-being, to become the fully human person God intended us to be?

Let me close with something written by Teilhard de Chardin:

God obviously has no need of the products of your busy activity since God could give himself everything without you. The only thing that concerns God, the only thing he desires intensely, is your faithful use of your freedom and the preference you accord him over the things around you. Try to grasp this: the things that are given to you on earth are given to you purely as an exercise, a blank sheet on which you make your own mind and heart. You are on a testing ground where God can judge whether you are capable of being translated to heaven and into his presence. You are on trial so that it matters very little what becomes of the fruits of the earth, or what they are worth. The whole question is whether you have learned how to...love. (*The Divine Milieu*)

But, at the same time, as we learn to love, the whole world benefits as we participate in the making, the forging, the coming of God's Kingdom.

Amen.