

Sermon for Farnham & St. John's Episcopal Churches
Sunday, November 10, 2019 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Texts: 2nd Thess. 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

“This is the Day”

A few years ago, I was interviewed by someone writing a book that would bear the title “Voices of Women of the Cloth.” Many voices, different opinions, some provocative seemed to be the author’s goal. As I remember she started off my interview with questions about the church and religion. She knew that I was teaching a course called Religions in America at the community college level.

Maybe it was Advent, or at least close to Advent, like today, with the Advent theme on the “Coming of Christ.” And maybe I had been thinking about the twin themes of Advent: not just Christ coming as a baby, human though God, but also the coming of Christ at the “end times” as Judge, in God like divine form. A Judge who appears so often it seems in the Bible to have an up or down, in or out (that is heaven or hell) future function in people’s lives. This is an approach with the fancy name, “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic passages generally have a “watch out for what you are thinking and doing now, or else!” theme.

When quizzed about religion I told the book’s author (and I said it rather forcibly): “I get tired of the emphasis on the hereafter. It hijacks the present.” It surprised me that the author opened the chapter on my “voice” with that rather provocative quote. Because it sounded rather accusatory.

Today’s passage in Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians has an apocalyptic tinge to it. After all Advent is coming up fast in the church – only three Sunday’s from now. But this passage has an interesting twist to it, one that sparked my remembering what I said to the author of “Voices.”

Early Christians were longing for the return of Christ. Remember that famous passage in the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, one heard at almost every funeral? “I go to prepare a place for you.” And those early Christians were hanging on the hope, the promise that there was a place for them. And they needed it – quickly – given the world they lived in.

What a comfort. What a beautiful sense of what is waiting for the Christian for his or her “yet to come.” My guess is that this is what early Christians, living in times of great persecution were longing for – relief from their present time. They were desperate to “live into the promise” that they heard from Jesus. However, the interesting twist in today’s Epistle message has to do with the timing of this “coming again of Christ.” Here, Paul is having to respond to fledgling Christians who are worried about the passage of time between Christ’s death and resurrection and his coming again. Early Christians worried about “how long” they were having to stay prepared, “at the ready” so to speak as they waited for Christ’s coming again. We guess that they thought it would be to their benefit – Christ’s return to judge the world and each of them.

We imagine them thinking that because they had been good and faithful through a lot of thick and thin, of course they would be waived forward through to heaven tho' others who opposed the "faith" would find the doorway closed. But as we read between the lines of the passage, we sense these folks are really worried about how long they can "hold out" – stay "worthy" enough to be judged "worthy enough" to make it into heaven when Christ does reappear.

This way of thinking – generally pointing to the future and the "what's next" and will I get to heaven is a theme that was definitely picked up by the Church over the centuries. Perhaps because it gave the church something to do, something to assure its future – to be the one that could define the doctrine and act as the one true mediator of salvation. The church could present itself as the Way to salvation – that is, getting into heaven.

I know, I know – I sound jaded about the historical church which certainly has done a lot of good work, but it has also done a lot of damage. When the church takes on the role of deciding who's in or who's out, not leaving that up to a loving Christ. For example, think of the Inquisition, think of church teachings which exclude rather than include people, think of doctrinal check-lists rather than a Way of Love simply trying to walk in Jesus' way. The only check-list I remember from the gospel spoken by Jesus was the Beatitudes, and that one doesn't seem to jive with how most people want to live life, does it – all that stuff about being meek, persecuted, sad, etc., etc. Jesus' message has been, always will be radical and trying to live upstream from worldly currents isn't easy. "How long, Lord, how long!" is these early Christians' prayer.

Paul in his letter is encouraging patience. He hopes these "antsy" followers of the Way of Christ will tap into, live into the comfort and hope that Christ's Way offers: that they will be strengthened in living the goodness that is available in the present in word and deed. I sense Paul is simply saying, "Take heart, stay the course." And while we don't have time this morning to struggle our way through Luke's passage with its emphasis on a theological debate about resurrection and what might seem a crazy Jewish tradition of brotherly marriage, we can take heart on Jesus' final statement there. "The Lord . . . he is God not of the dead, but of the living."

Mary Oliver, a favorite contemporary poet, speaks of the life we have been given by the Creator as "this one wild precious life." I believe that the God of the Living Jesus talks about and even Paul would approve of the question Mary Oliver then asks, "So, what are you going to do with it?" This precious life and what we're going to do with it until our passage beyond it into the yet to come is really our theme this morning.

"This is the Life" said Terry Hershey in his internet blog this week using the name of his new book. What a great thought that re-orient us to how we are to live the life the Lord has given us, here and now, day by day. How we are to live the day the Lord has given us – today. My guess is that God, as Terry seems to promote, wants us to live into it, generously and enthusiastically. Not waste this day, this life, not let the future hijack what is offered us in the present.

Terry goes on to observe, “We are wired to savor the beauty and goodness of This Life.” As this message this morning winds down, I leave the following words from Terry for you to take home and consider in the week to come. His question and some “good news”. Maybe just maybe God is using Terry’s voice to catch our attention today. Here goes: A question and a few thoughts:

“What holds us back? We are easily weighed down by distraction, hurry, worry, fear and public opinion. The good news? This isn’t a race or contest or beauty pageant. It is the permission to embrace what is already alive and well inside. Every encounter, every relationship, is a place to include, invite mercy, encourage, receive, heal, reconcile, repair, say thank you, pray, celebrate, refuel and restore.”

Terry concludes:

Before we wish for another life, *let us feel this life.*
Before we give in to “if only,” *let us listen to this moment.*
Before we succumb to “someday,” *let us inhale this day.*
Before we trade in this life (for) the life we “should” have,
let us taste this life.

Some food for thought. Taste and see that the Lord is good: in the here and now. Let’s leave the yet to come in the Lord’s loving and gracious hands as we live in his Presence, today, tomorrow and always. This is the day the Lord has made, rejoice and live thankful for and in it! Alleluia!