

Proper 28 – C Standing Steady in God

SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 65:17-25 (Track 1)

Isaiah 12 (Track 1)

or Malachi 4:1-2a (Track 2)

Psalm 98 (Track 2)

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19



Today's Readings

Today's readings call us to remain steadfast in the faith. Isaiah (Track 1) imagines a new heaven and new earth recreated as God desires them to be. In Malachi (Track 2), the prophet assures us that healing and restoration will come only to those who cling to God's name. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul proclaims that the Christian life has no room for laziness but calls for enduring faithfulness. Unimpressed by the temple's beauty, Jesus redirects his disciples' attention to the end of the age.

Isaiah 65:17-25 (Track 1)

In chapter 65, God responds to the psalm of intercession in 63:7–64:12. Today's reading, the last three stanzas of God's reply, builds on the historical act of redemption proclaimed in 40:1-11 and expands it into a promise of a new creation. The Old Testament descriptions of the age to come reveal the new world as a restoration of God's original purpose in creation.

The reference to life expectancy (v. 20) designates more than a promise of longevity. The elimination of sorrow, impossible when death remains, and the earlier promise that God "will swallow up death forever" (25:7) seem to suggest a return to the Eden-like conditions before the fall. Then the tree of life was accessible and granted immortality. Adam's experience of futility in labor, also a result of the fall, will vanish.

- ◆ Which promises of a new social life are you most attracted by?

- ◆ Which of these promises have least been fulfilled? Why?

Malachi 4:1-2a (Track 2)

Very little is known of this prophet. Even the name Malachi (1:1, literally, *my messenger*) may be a title rather than a personal name (2:7; 3:1). Malachi, concerned for the purity of worship and worshipers at the temple and for the fulfillment of the responsibilities of the priesthood, condemns moral and religious abuses. He probably prophesied after the temple was rebuilt, around 500–450 BCE.

Malachi frames his teaching in question-and-answer form. The problem is posed: since the wicked prosper, God must not care about evil (2:17). The truth lies in the future. On the day when the Lord acts, those whose names are written in the "book of remembrance" (3:16) will be spared, accomplishing justice for all.

God, "the sun of righteousness" 4:2), will bring not only destructive heat but healing warmth. The book ends with a commentary on 3:1, identifying the messenger to come with Elijah. Much later, John the Baptist was identified with this figure.

◆ What picture do you imagine as you read these verses?

◆ What kind of healing do you think will come for those who fear God?

◆ Does this passage help you to endure a difficult experience you are currently undergoing? Why or why not?

Paul reminds the community both of the tradition he taught them (perhaps the statement in verse 10) and of his own example. The idle, whom Paul describes in a wordplay as *busybodies* instead of *busy*, are exhorted to earn their own living, while the community is encouraged to persevere in doing good.

◆ How might Christians live in idleness today?

◆ What are the dangers of living in idleness?

◆ Why do people become “weary in doing what is right” (v. 13)? What might prevent this from happening?

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

The problem of idleness in the Thessalonian community had been noted before in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. It may have been a reaction to the expectation of an imminent end to human affairs, or a consequence of the belief that “the day of the Lord is already here” (2:2). The context would seem to indicate that such idleness was a misunderstanding of mutual support in a community largely composed of the poor.

Luke 21:5-19

Today’s reading is taken from the first part of the end-times discourse (21:5-36). Luke has already included teaching on readiness for the Son of Man’s return (12:35-48; 17:20-37) and the destruction of Jerusalem (19:41-44). Here Jesus redefines the end-times as a process begun with the birth of the Church.

To a question about the destruction of the temple, Jesus responds with a series of sayings. The first are signs of the age (21:8-11), as borne out by events in Acts. The disciples will be imprisoned. They are not to prepare a “defense in advance” (v. 14, literally, *to practice gestures*, as a professional Greek speaker would), for the Lord will guide them. Despite betrayal by family and friends, they will win eternal life through endurance. Jesus’ intent throughout is not merely to let his disciples in on an apocalyptic secret, but to encourage them to be prepared and steadfast; his tone is one of triumph rather than of warning.

- ◆ How do you distinguish between false prophets and true disciples?
- ◆ What message of hope do you find in this passage of scripture?

Reflection

One thing the gospels of this season do is turn our assumptions upside down. The attractive, accomplished person isn’t necessarily the best pray-er; the annoying widow persists in winning. And today, as a final straw, Jesus undercuts those who are admiring the temple. What could be more innocent? Haven’t we all been in awe at the art treasures of the Vatican, the beauties of Westminster Abbey, or the lofty spires of medieval cathedrals? What’s wrong with *that*?

“Be careful what you trust,” Jesus might respond. Don’t place all your faith in marvelous buildings, efficient plans or clever designs. Furthermore, don’t even be terrified by wars and those things you naturally dread. Nothing is as it seems. Even your most trusted relatives and friends will betray you; people will hate you vehemently.

At this point, we might be tempted to throw in the towel. Why be Christian if it gives us so little security?

“Ah,” the wily Jesus might answer. Faith brings the ultimate security: “not a hair of your head will perish.” Humans created by God and born for eternal life needn’t be tossed about by currents of admiration or fear. They have the one sure thing: a God who preserves them despite all disaster.

Quietly consider:

- ◆ In what ways might Jesus’ presentation of the “bigger picture” calm my fears about the coming week? the coming year? the remainder of my time on earth?

Prayer Starter

Gracious God, you are around me and within me. Help me to...

Food for Thought

“Let us recognize our weakness, knowing we cannot stand for the twinkling of an eye except with the protection of grace, and let us reverently cling to and trust only in God.”

—Julian of Norwich