
Sermon

The Rev. Buddy Crawford
The Cathedral of St. Philip
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Proper 28, Year B

When I was in the 7th grade, one of the large, fundamentalist churches in my small hometown brought in a group of evangelists to lead a week long revival. Many of my classmates were attending the services geared to young people with special music and dramatic skits. Each day during recess and between classes, kids who had attended the services would discuss what they had heard and seen - the message that we were living in the "end times."

About the middle of the week special newspapers appeared on campus - the headlines declaring boldly that the end was near. These newspapers were evangelical mockups intended to spread the evangelist's apocalyptic message. The papers contained pictures of Russia tanks, nuclear bombs, and barb wired covered villages in Eastern Europe, along with their pictures were articles describing life in communist-controlled countries and the increase of atheism. The cold war was going strong, threatening Christianity and American values. And according to the paper there was one solution - get right with Jesus and secure a place in heaven.

And at home each night we listened to the news, stories of wars and rumors of wars, stories that at that time were a constant part of the newscasts. It appeared that there were signs all around us, nuclear proliferation was beginning in earnest and the fear of nuclear war and annihilation was almost palpable. Natural disasters were prevalent - earthquakes brought destruction and famines were causing widespread hunger and starvation. It did not take much to convince impressionable young minds that placing trust in God was in order, heaven was the goal and indeed heaven might just be right around the corner.

I listened to my friends questioning if they were truly "saved," I watched as some of them broke down in tears, fearful of what tomorrow might bring - if there was a tomorrow. Although I was troubled by what I saw and heard, I also was not willing to buy it hook, line, and sinker. If anything I was more confused than convinced that Jesus was coming soon. What if the wars and famines and earthquakes were only part of the human condition that had plagued humankind from the beginning of creation? I grew up hearing stories from Great Uncles and Grandparents about World War II and the Korean conflict, but no one had spoken about the end of the world or the imminent return of Christ in those stories.

Our gospel lesson this morning is the beginning of an entire chapter in Mark referred to as the little apocalypse. In Mark's longest discourse, Jesus describes his own expectations of the end of the world to his disciples. As the scene opens, an unnamed disciple is expressing awe for the majestic buildings of the temple complex in Jerusalem, the massive stones with their golden appointments. Jesus interrupts him with a question and declaration that there will come a time when not one stone of the sacred buildings will remain on another. It must have been shocking for his disciples to hear his words - the temple having long been the center of life and worship in Israel.

In the next scene, the disciples are with Jesus on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple complex and they begin

questioning him on when the destruction will happen and what signs will precede this ominous event. Jesus' first words of caution are as important to pay attention to as the physical signs which follow, "Beware that no one leads you astray." Israel's long history is filled with the people trusting false prophets, following unfaithful kings and religious leaders. Jesus is telling his followers to test our leaders and not to be deceived; instead be faithful in following his words and his example of life - anything that is contrary to Jesus' behavior is false.

Jesus' second admonition is to remain calm even when the world appears to be falling apart around us - even when there are wars and rumors of wars. Although there may be immense suffering and tragedy in the world, the followers of Jesus are to stay on his path. When we remain calm, a faithful response to the mission and ministry of making Jesus known to the world can continue. The disciples, who include us, are then able to participate in establishing God's kingdom on the earth. I believe this means when we test our leaders and when we remain calm in the face of adversity we are able to meet those challenges by relying on God's abundant grace.

In Our lesson from Samuel, Hannah is deeply distressed. Praying to the Lord, and weeping bitterly she says, "O Lord of Hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant," Hannah is distraught that she has not been able to bear a son for her husband. This is the famine she faces, being barren in a patriarchal culture where a woman's value is determined by her fertility and the number of children she produces. And Hannah is at war with her husband's very fertile second wife, who taunts and ridicules her about her condition. And while the taunting causes Hannah despair, it also drives her to God.

Even in her anxious and troubled state Hannah stays on the path, praying to God in the temple at Shiloh. With weeping she offers her distress to God, trusting that God will hear and care for her. She is sad, but calm. Eli, the old priest of the temple, sees her praying and pouring out her heart to God, and misreading the situation assumes that she is drunk, rebuking Hannah. She does not give in to his lack of understanding and does not allow him to lead her astray. Hannah defends her position and in the end received Eli's blessing and assurance that God will hear her prayer. After she returns home the Lord responds and Hannah conceives a son. By staying her course, by being faithful, Hannah becomes part of God's plan for Israel. The words of the song she sings are true, "The Lord will guard the feet of his faithful ones." Hannah bears a son, Samuel, who is the last Judge of Israel and the prophet who anoints the first King of Israel - Saul.

On the Sunday after the evangelists left town, I stayed in the sacristy after the service waiting for the other acolytes to depart. When we were alone I asked Father Gilmore if we could talk. Father pulled out a chair for me to join him at the table where he was sitting and I told him about the week and my concern for myself, my family and friends. He listened intently as I recounted the story I told you earlier. At the end he looked at me for a long minute and then said, "Buddy, why are you letting these people distract you with things that are beyond your control. You have been baptized and nothing can separate you from God. You faithfully serve as an acolyte and participate in EYC, you are an asset to the church, and God will use you as long as you continue to be part of the community - don't get distracted!" I'm sure he said more that I cannot remember; I only know that I left confident of my faith and that God would not forsake me.

We do live in disturbing times; we are in the midst of war and natural disasters and disease, hunger and homelessness. Daily these conditions take the lives of people in places like Afghanistan and Darfur, and on the streets of Atlanta. In a time of economic downturn and personal financial hardship, we can react frantically and fearfully, or we can remain calm and on the path that leads to life and wholeness.

In her book *Your Life, Your Faith*, Jenifer Gamber points out that the gospel writers tell the story of the good news with strong verbs, imperatives: repent, feed, clothe, heal, welcome, visit, forgive, proclaim - they are the verbs of servant ministry that Jesus calls us to do - TO BE. This is our ministry - the ministry of all the baptized here at the Cathedral of St. Philip.

We live out that ministry by caring for those who come through our doors for worship and hospitality, by giving financially to relieve the suffering of others through our mission and outreach programs, by providing pastoral care to the sick and the lonely, and by living out of the abundance of God's grace, not out of fear or a sense of scarcity.

The servant ministry Jesus calls us to extends beyond the church. The imperatives transform the way we deal with others in our schools, and businesses, and in the broader community. In all areas of our lives we are to be people of integrity, supporting our employees, neighbors, friends, and the strangers who come our way by giving, training, leading, educating,

and showing hospitality to all of them as fellow creatures made in the divine image. When we stay on the course, undistracted in following Jesus our Shepherd, we share in establishing God's kingdom in the present, waiting patiently for his return in the Father's perfect time.

AMEN.

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