

IN THE MEANTIME

Malachi 4:1-2; 2 Thess. 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

The end of the Church Year is fast approaching and with it we get the usual spate of lessons about the end of the world. I wonder if more of our pews would be full if I were better at putting the fear of God into you with a sermon about how the end is near and it is urgent for us to get our spiritual houses in order before the terrible day arrives. In this way, I could set you on edge and ratchet up your fear, put you in a state of high anxiety before delivering the promise that those who are devoted to God (and come to church regularly, of course) will be spared the pains of the end because of their faithfulness. It's a time-tested strategy of preachers which continues to work well in many places even to this day, some 2000 years after the warning of the end of the world was taken up into our faith.

The New Testament depicts Jesus as declaring the end of the world as coming, and we may believe that this depiction of Jesus is accurate. But, of course, the end did not come. There have been wars and insurrections, as there are at present, nations have risen against nations and kingdoms against kingdoms; there have been and are earthquakes and famines and plagues, there have been portents of all sorts—but the end has not come, nor does it seem to be imminent. So what is the preacher to do? Not too much, I would say, since neither the preachers nor anyone else know anything about the end of the world and when it will occur. This is not because there is nothing to be said on the subject, but only that what can honestly be said will not have people breaking down the doors to get into church.

Thinking about the end of the world causes us to think about the beginning of the world in the sense that what has an ending also has a beginning, and from this we may draw the conclusion that the universe of which we are a part is not everlasting. Considered from the point of view of astrophysics and thinking about our solar system, stars like our own sun will eventually become red giants, expanding to enormous size and enveloping their inner planets and later shedding their outer layers to become a white dwarf. This is how the solar system dies. The universe of which our solar system is a part will, it is believed, either collapse under its own weight in a fiery big crunch or expand forever to the point of sterility and death. None of this will happen soon—you shouldn't stop paying your utility bills. The death of our sun will not begin for another 5 billion years, give or take a few weeks. The death of the universe is in the order of trillions of years. All of this is obviously on time-scales much longer than that in which our human species might evolve or disappear, but these are things which scientists say are certain to happen, and they represent the ultimate end not just of life but of the possibility of life. Which is to say, everything in nature is temporary. Everything!

So how does that make you feel? Small, but I suspect not too bad, not too threatened. How concerned can anyone be by processes and events that are billions and trillions of years distant? We're concerned about what to have for lunch and when this sermon is going to be over and a test coming up in school and how things are going on the job or with the economy or the check up we're about to have at the doctor's. If we're worried about an end, it is the passing of a loved one or one's own death and passing. To heck with the end of the world! What about the end of me and those I care about? Am I just here today and gone tomorrow?

The first of the lessons for today is from the prophet Malachi, where we read not of the ultimate end of the world but the end of the world as Malachi knows it, a world where the arrogant and evildoers are doing fine even as those who are honest and up-standing are suffering. According to Malachi, this isn't going to be the way things remain. God is going to step in to put things right, and the arrogant and the evildoers will get their comuppence and the righteous will be vindicated for their righteousness. Do you believe that? Do you believe that God will do that? Though Malachi's prophecy was set down some 2500 years ago, it seems that the arrogant and evildoers are still around and in many cases not doing badly, while the righteous still have a pretty tough time of it.

As a case in point, the United States now has a more unequal distribution of wealth than nations like Nicaragua and Venezuela and Guyana, nations we thought of in the past as "banana republics," nations that were run by plutocrats, a few families who owned most of the nation's wealth. From 1980 to 2005 in the good ol' US of A, more than four-fifths of the total increase in American incomes went to the richest one percent of the population. And yet it seems likely we are going to continue the Bush tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires, even as we consider allowing unemployment benefits to end and resistance builds to finance a jobs program with Federal tax dollars. Non-partisan economists agree that extending these tax cuts for the rich and repealing health care reform will worsen the deficits that are so feared by fiscal conservatives, and in the process will heighten even farther the economic inequality in the nation. According to Malachi, shouldn't we expect the opposite to be happening, thereby redressing a situation that is economically unhealthy and morally sickening?

But if this example is too close to home for some (though I can't see why it would be), consider Muslim jihadists who are willing shoot or blow up children and women and men at prayer, indicating a complete absence of moral or religious or cultural restraint in their attempt to settle their greivances. Many of these fanatics come from failing societies and are among the "sitting-around people" who have no work and no prospects for work. They are part of a civil war within Islam between forces of decency and modernism and forces of atavistic and pathological resentment. According to Malachi, shouldn't we expect these pathetic murderers to be cut off, even as those who strive for peace and reconciliation are vindicated? When will this come to pass?

The question before us is what can Christians meaningfully say about the end of the world from the vantage point of our faith, and it seems to come down to this: *we live in God's world, and God is good*. After all, have we not awakened to this day and looked upon the beauty of loved ones and the beauty of nature, enjoying the inestimable gift of consciousness, all of which stems from the fact that we inhabit a life-bearing universe, billions of years old, in which it is possible for creatures like ourselves, creatures capable of great good and tragic evil, to evolve and to survive and even to flourish? Our faith teaches us that God is at our beginning, that God is our sustaining, and that God is at our ending, because *God alone is ultimate*; and further, that the universe and all of its prospects are the creatures of love, and that the whole of creation bends toward justice. You can believe this, as I do, or you can reject this. Believing is better, because it is a source of hope. What belief in God means is that death is not the last word and that the God of life is the last word. That this is so doesn't require that Malachi's vision will be realized in our time any more than it was realized in his time. It doesn't mean that we

will not die or even that the physical universe will not die. What it means is that we belong to God, who is Source of us, Word to us, Spirit in us. People who believe this should live differently than if they did not believe. People who believe this—let’s say us—will carry in their hearts a hope that is no mere optimism in the face of all of our failures and frustrations. We will not despair, because we believe the final say belongs to God. In the meantime, we have lives to live, we have work to do, we have love to share. This is our time and place to be Christ to our neighbors. And so to God we sing:

We know your truth will last.
We trust your reign is sure.
Equip us for those daily tasks
that help your world endure.
(“We Love Your Realm, O God”)

Amen

25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church